

A Gricean account of linguistic meaning

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One of the great challenges of pragmatics is how to deal with the phenomenon of utterances with completely non-compositional meaning; those which are nothing like the sum of their parts. In many cases, we are confronted by an utterance which is composed of words we understand, but which, in context, comes to have a completely unrelated meaning established in an apparently unprincipled way. Such utterances, taken collectively, constitute a larger grammatical unit called the “linguistics lecture”. It is to this unit which I will devote my focus in this essay, concentrating on describing the modes of analysis which enable us to extract some approximation of speaker meaning from this mass of confusing data.

An influential approach to the problem of interpreting linguistic meaning in context was that of the philosopher H. Paul Grice. At the height of the new rationalist programme instigated by Chomsky, it had become clear that the concepts which linguists were attempting to describe could not be made clear in the language they had at their disposal. Consequently, their use of language was developing; sentences became in some sense idiomatic, and the propositions they expressed ceased to have any consistent relation to the lexemes used within them. This caused certain difficulties in interpretation, prompting sceptics to express the viewpoint that no-one knew precisely what they were talking about in the first place.

Grice, aggrieved at the implied intrusion upon the territory traditionally occupied by philosophy, devoted several minutes to developing a system of maxims of linguistics. The purpose of these was twofold: first, to encapsulate the way in which compositional theories of meaning needed to be augmented to cope with the extension they were undergoing, and second, to assist non-speakers in their interpretation of the texts of the day.

Grice proposed four maxims: they are as follows.

1. **Maxim of quality.** Never make a statement that has previously been contradicted.
2. **Maxim of quantity.** Say at least as much as is logically possible, given the need to refrain from statements that have previously been contradicted.

3. **Maxim of relation.** Any writing must include references to all Chomsky's work published since 1957.
4. **Maxim of manner.** Avoid using terms which have ever been used before in linguistics, and avoid using a marked or prolix expression when you can use two.

The application of Grice's maxims greatly increased the general understanding of what linguistics was really about. However, no sooner had the maxims been published than other scholars perceived the need to amend them. First to be attacked was the Maxim of Relation: initially, it was believed that this needed to be extended to spoken discourse as well as the written word. This had disastrous consequences – from c.1970 to 1973, progress in linguistics came to a complete halt as linguisticians were forced to communicate solely in example sentences. Chomsky proposed one solution to this problem, writing book after book for no reason other than to increase the total stock of sentences available for professional use. Eventually, the issue was addressed by Levinson, with the publication of his famous T-principle, which replaced the Maxim of Relation with the quasi-equivalent formulation that:

“Any utterance is admissible as long as the speaker wears a T-shirt recognising Chomsky's contribution as they talk”.

However, this only represented a temporary patch to Grice's maxims. Months after freedom of communication was restored in linguistics, it became impossible to make any statement which hadn't already been made. Then, within the year, it became impossible to make a statement which hadn't already been contradicted. This was solved by Horn's principle of Levels, which stated that:

“Any statement which contradicts a previous claim may be made as long as it is made at a higher level than the previous statement”.

This motivated a switch, spreading throughout the discipline globally, from 12-point to 14-point font.

Now, as we enter a new era of understanding linguistics, it is sobering to note that only one of Grice's maxims has survived unscathed. The Maxim of Manner still seems to govern discourse reliably. However, the picture is not as clear as it might appear. Preliminary studies of the linguistics department at the University of Antananarivo, in the Malagasy

Republic, suggests that there, discourse may be conducted in an entirely different way. Researchers have reported that lectures are given in the islanders' everyday language, questions are answered directly and Chomsky is only mentioned when his work is directly relevant. This clearly raises important questions for future study, and may yet motivate a seismicological shift in our understanding of linguistics as a means of communication.

In summary, then, we must be careful to avoid over-generalising about the global behaviour of linguisticians based on an inadequate sample. However, if Grice is right, we must already take great care to interpret the utterances of linguists correctly. Failure to do this could have unimaginable consequences.