

HERBERT PAUL GRICE ON MEANING (SOME REMARKS)*

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ABSTRACT. *Herbert Paul Grice on Meaning (Some Remarks).* In order to get a more complete idea of Herbert Paul Grice's theory of meaning, we have to go beyond his article entitled *Meaning*, and pay attention to the details he later added to his theory in his other texts. With the introduction of such concepts as the cooperative principle and the conversational maxims he outlined a more complex theory of meaning, which completes the formal theories of meaning. This paper is an outline of the modified Griceian theory of meaning.

Keywords: *sentence, utterance, intention, meaning, implicature, cooperative principle, conversational maxims*

Contradiction

We are facing a contradiction, it seems. Technical progress and development seems to have reassured us that the creation of a thinking machine is not an impossible enterprise. We have ATM machines, self-driving cars, and computers that were programmed to execute certain task, yet we don't seem to have come any closer to creating a thinking machine. It is enough to think of such machines as the robot waiter who was so perplexed at the sight of a nosebleed that he didn't know what to do, or the chess machine, which as a response to his opponent's non-optimal move lost the game. In these cases the robots didn't know how to react to an unknown situation.

The most plausible explanation for these phenomena is the one that states that the cause the robots were perplexed was that they were unable to learn. And by this we mean that they were unable to learn from their experience, because they

* The current study is a translation of an in press article written originally in Hungarian. The original title was "Herbert Paul Grice a jelentésről. (Néhány észrevétel)". The original article will be published in *Erdélyi Múzeum*, 2016/4.

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don't even have any experience. The following simplistic explanation can shed some light on the issue: the robots are unable to learn, because they are unable to think, and this is because they don't have their own language. A robot only "knows" the things that he was programmed "to know", in some cases he also knows some things he can deduce from his initial knowledge base with the help of certain deductive rules.

Limits of a Formal Language

The research of artificial intelligence is based on the formal conception of language, and this formal conception of language can be traced back to Gottlob Frege's article *Begriffsschrift*.¹ In the *Begriffsschrift* Frege wanted to create a language that was void of the ambiguities of natural language. In such an ideal language every word has one and only one clearly defined meaning, and every sign has one and only one interpretation. We all know this language. It is the language of Logics (Mathematics). Frege wanted this language to solve the problem of ambiguity by getting rid of it. According to him this language works quite simple. The meaning of a sentence can be reduced to the meaning of its words and the order of the words in the sentence. This is called the *principle of compositionality*.

However, put into practice the Fregeian theory has its difficulties. When creating utterances, speakers don't seem to take into consideration the Fregeian principles. The Fregeian theory of language presented in the *Begriffsschrift* and in *On Sense and Reference*² can't handle sentences that are about fictional entities. According to Frege every sentence has a truth value that is every sentence is either true or false. But this is so, only if the words have a reference in reality, and if the sentences describe entities as they are in reality. Yet the sentences about fictional entities show that these are neither true, nor false. (E.g. "Ulysses's horse can speak". The reason for the Fregeian theory not assigning any truth value to this sentence is that the "Ulysses's horse" expression doesn't have a real world reference.)³ These formal theories presuppose in fact two things: a realist ontology and the correspondence theory of truth. According to the first one the world is a set of mind-independent objects. Irrespective of what objects' existence we accept, the

¹ Cf. Frege, Gottlob, "*Begriffsschrift*", in Jean van Heijenoort, *From Frege to Gödel*, Harvard University Press, 1967, 1–82.

² Cf. Frege, Gottlob, "*On Sense and Reference*", in Peter Geach, Max Black, *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, Basil Blackwell, 1960, 56–78.

³ See Farkas Katalin, Kelemen János, *Nyelvfilozófia*, Áron Kiadó, Budapest, 2002.

objects in the world *exist* and *they are as they are* regardless of our experience about them. According to the second view sentences are true or false based on how they represent the world. A sentence is true if it represents the world as it is, otherwise the sentence is false.

If we again consider the examples presented at the beginning of this paper, the question arises: why did the two robots recoil from the unknown situations? The answer seems to be simple, but also poses some serious questions. The robots recoiled from the unknown situations because they did not understand those situations. And it seems that together with the answer we have arrived at the core question of the whole problem. And the question sounds the following: what does it mean to understand a certain situation? Or if we reformulate the question and translate it to the language of the philosophy of language: what does it mean to understand a sentence? In this case we of course accept the view that to understand a situation is to understand the sentence that describes that particular situation.

John L. Austin's Remark

As we have seen the Fregeian theory doesn't give us a satisfactory explanation for the problem of meaning. This is because the principle of compositionality takes into consideration just two dimensions of language: the syntactic and the semantic dimensions, totally ignoring the pragmatic dimension. In his William James lectures John L. Austin draws our attention to the pragmatic dimension of language. Very briefly: Austin drew our attention to the fact that besides the *descriptive* (constative) utterances there are also *performative* utterances (performatives).⁴ Performatives are utterances that when uttered, don't describe a state of fact, but rather an action is performed by them. Such performatives would be the act of naming, apologizing, betting, promising, etc. Thus, if in the case of uttering "It is morning" we describe an actual state of the world, in case of uttering "I promise, I will be there" we don't describe a state of the world, but rather we make a promise, that we will be present at a certain place. In case of the performatives we don't even use the true-false truth values, but label these utterances as *successful* and *unsuccessful*. Austin however did not end his analysis here. He further split the utterances into *locutionary*, *illocutionary* and *perlocutionary* acts. By locutionary act he meant the voicing/uttering of an utterance (e.g. we utter the words "Forgive me"); by illocutionary act he meant the phenomenon of performing a certain act by uttering certain words (e.g. we perform

⁴ Cf. Austin, John L., *How to do Things with Words*, Oxford University Press, 1962. 1–11.

the act of apologizing by uttering the words “Forgive me”); by perlocutionary act he meant the impact of an utterance (e.g. the listener forgives the speaker because he believes that the speaker uttered the words sincerely, and as a result of his utterance the speaker would like the listener to forgive him).⁵

Herbert Paul Grice vs John R. Searle⁶

The problem of meaning veritably enthralled the analytic philosophers in the twentieth century. I would like to focus my attention especially on two philosophers: H. P. Grice and J. R. Searle, because their debate on meaning shapes and defines the views on meaning in today’s analytic philosophy.

When we consider the Gricean view on meaning, first and foremost we tend to look at his very famous article, *Meaning*.⁷ In this article Grice differentiates between two types of meaning.⁸ He calls the first type of meaning the *natural meaning*, and except one example, he doesn’t really focus on it. The classic example is the example of smoke and fire. According to Grice whenever we say that “The smoke meant fire”, we suppose that there is an intrinsic, substantive relation between the sign and the thing the sign is a sign of. In the second case however, the link between the sign and the thing of which the sign is a sign of can be reduced to convention. Thus if we utter the sentence “The blinking of the turn signal meant that the car will change direction” we can’t claim that between the blinking of a bulb and a vehicle’s change in direction there is a necessary or natural connection. (Vehicles change directions without signaling this with the blinking of the turn signal. As a counterexample it is enough to think of bicyclists, who signal their intent in direction change with their hands.) Grice calls this second type of meaning *non-natural meaning*. While in case of the natural meaning the link between the sign and the thing that the sign is a sign of is necessary, this is not the case with the non-natural meaning. Thus Grice had to explain, why is it that a certain sign in a certain situation signifies a certain thing and not something else. Simply put: how can a sign signify something at all? The Griceian answer is quite simple. A non-natural sign can be a sign of something simply because someone (a speaker) wants for that sign to

⁵ Cf. Austin, John L., *How to do Things with Words*, Oxford University Press, 1962. 94–107.

⁶ For a more in-depth analysis see my article: Gergely P. Alpár, “Grice jelentéseméletének searle-i kritikája”, in *Erdélyi Múzeum*, 4/2015, 148–155.

⁷ Grice, Herbert Paul, “*Meaning*”, in Herbert Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, 2002, 213–223.

⁸ Grice, Herbert Paul, “*Meaning*”, in Herbert Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, 2002, 214.

be a sign of something for another person (listener). And the listener recognizes the meaning of the sign by realizing that the speaker wanted to signal something in the following way: so that the listener recognizes the speaker's intention to signal something, and the speaker's intention for the listener to react to the message in a specific way. Thus we can say, that according to the Gricean idea, the meaning is equal to the listener's intended reaction triggered by the speaker.⁹

According to John R. Searle there are at least two problems with the Gricean definition of meaning.¹⁰ One of the shortcomings is the lack of clarification that is needed to explain the tie between meaning and convention; and the second one is that Grice doesn't clearly differentiate between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary acts. In the first case, taking in consideration that according to Grice meaning can be reduced to the speaker's intention and the listener's intended reaction triggered by the speaker, Searle would like to know how is it possible for a sign not to mean everything.¹¹ (E.g. Why can't the "Sun is shining" utterance mean that "The grass is green"?) Searle's answer to this question is that an utterance can't mean everything, because the conventional meaning of the words (the one that it is defined by the dictionary) and their places in the utterance already determines the meaning of the utterance. In the second case Searle's criticism claims that not every utterance has a perlocutionary effect.¹² If in case of a declarative sentence we can say that the speaker's intended effect is to persuade the listener, there are cases in which such an intended effect cannot be set. For example in the case when a sentence wasn't uttered in all seriousness, or in the case of greetings.

Grice's Remark and Its Consequences

We said that whenever we speak of the Gricean definition of meaning first and foremost we think of his article *Meaning*. This is justified in the sense in which Grice formulated his first remarks about meaning in this article. We would be utterly mistaken however thinking that in this article Grice presented his theory of meaning in its complete form. After the publication of *Meaning* partly as a reaction of the criticism that he received, partly because he himself thought that some issues should be clarified about meaning, Grice published a series of articles in which he re-examined the problem of meaning.

⁹ Cf. Gergely P. Alpár, "Grice jelentéseméletének searle-i kritikája", in *Erdélyi Múzeum*, 4./2015, 150.

¹⁰ See Searle, John R., *Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 43–44.

¹¹ Cf. Searle, John R., *Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 44–45.

¹² Cf. Searle, John R., *Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 46–47.

Grice based his article *Logic and Conversation*¹³ on an observation. He witnessed the debate between the formalists and the informalists about the language. The formalists maintained Frege's position. They thought that an ideal language consists of axioms and logical principles; every word has one and only one meaning; and since this language is used primarily as the language of science, within this language valid arguments play a substantial part. In contrast, the informalists thought that the fact that a language can be used primarily for science is just one aspect of language. We use language for several other things. Moreover, everyday experience shows us that we make deductions without the aid of formal means. The solution would be to create a logic that is not reductionist. But the members of the two groups agreed on one thing: the meaning of the formal words used in formal logic is not the same as the meaning of the words that are used in natural language that correspond with these formal words. Grice didn't want to take sides in the debate. His remark about the debate was the following "the common assumptions of the contestants that the divergences do in fact exist is (broadly speaking) a common mistake, and that the mistake arises from an inadequate attention to the nature and importance of the conditions governing conversation."¹⁴ Thus the cause of the perplexity was the omission of an aspect, and as we shall see, this aspect plays a huge part in Grice's theory of meaning.

The Way the Gricean Theory Works

First we should examine Grice's response to the explicit criticism of Searle. The question in this case is: why cannot a sentence mean anything, or considering the earlier presented examples, why "The sun is shining" sentence doesn't mean the same as "The grass is green"? Grice's answer to this question is identical with the Searleian answer. The meaning of the first sentence cannot be the same as the meaning of the second sentence, simply because the words in the first sentence are not the same as the words in the second sentence. The meanings of the words are different, so the meanings of the sentences also have to be different. We have to note here that Grice is concerned with word-meaning on the one hand and with sentence-meaning on the other hand, and that he also accepts the compositionality principle. Thus we can say, that according to Grice the meaning of a sentence can be

¹³ Grice, Herbert Paul, "Logic and Conversation", in Herbert Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, 2002, 22–40.

¹⁴ Grice, Herbert Paul, "Logic and Conversation", in Herbert Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, 2002, 24.

reduced to the meaning of the words in that particular sentence and the rules that were used to combine those words. Moreover, he explicitly claims that in certain situations the speaker's intentions can be recognized based on the conventional meaning of the words that were used, and the conventional meaning of the sentence.¹⁵ We know that a speaker intended to express such-and-such a meaning because he used these words so-and-so. If the "sun" in "The sun is shining" sentence refers to the celestial body, it cannot also refer to the "grass" in the sentence "The grass is green", because here the "grass" refers to the plant that has narrow green leaves, and so on and so forth. In this respect Grice accepts the Searleian explanation, however their views still differ.

Grice accepts that the compositionality principle can be a solution when discussing meaning, but only in certain cases. For there are cases, when this principle cannot offer a viable explanation. Consider the following example: X says to Y that "He [Z] is in the grip of a vice". If we only rely on the principle of compositionality, we will define the sentence's meaning as follows: some parts of Z is stuck in a certain tool. But X's intention wasn't that to express this meaning, but the meaning that Z was unable to change one of the negative features of his personality. The question is, how did X manage to express this latter meaning by uttering the above mentioned sentence?

This is the point that we arrive at the aspect that was omitted by both the formalists and the informalists, and that according to Grice govern every conversation of ours. We have to think of two things here: the *cooperative principle* and the *conversational maxims*. But before looking at these conditions, we have to clarify the meaning of some basic notions.

Let us consider our former example. X tells Y about Z that "He's in the grip of a vice", and he says the same thing to A about B. The sentence that was uttered is the same in both cases, but while in the first case X expresses the thought that Z was unable to change one of the negative features of his personality, in the second case he expresses the thought that a part of B is stuck in a certain tool. The sentences are the same, but their meanings are different. What X utters in both cases is the *sentence*, and regardless of the utterance's place, time and other circumstances it doesn't change. In contrast, depending on the circumstances the utterance of the same sentence will result in different *utterances*.¹⁶ The utterances then depend on the circumstances, or as Grice would say, they depend on different contexts. Grice thinks that one of the elements that will decide the result of uttering a certain

¹⁵ Cf. Grice, Herbert Paul, "Utterer's Meaning and Intentions", in Herbert Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, 2002, 100–101.

¹⁶ Cf. Reboul, Anne, Moeschler, Jacques, *A társalgás cselei (La pragmatique aujourd'hui. Une nouvelle science de la communication)* [in Hungarian translation], Osiris Kiadó, 2006, 52.

sentence is *context*. Thus uttering the sentence “Then I told him that he’s in the grip of a vice” will result in different utterances based on the following factors: who uttered the sentence, to whom, in what circumstances. Based on these circumstances the sentence can have different meanings; it can refer to a person’s inability to change a negative feature of his personality or to someone being stuck in a tool.

Considering the notions of sentence and utterance we can also distinguish between two other notions, the notions of *saying* and *suggesting*, or *implying* as Grice calls it.¹⁷ The notion of saying is in close relation with the notion of sentence. If a speaker says something, it means that he produces a string of words called sentence. If we don’t take into consideration any of the circumstances that were the case when a sentence was uttered, we can say that the speaker meant exactly what he said. This will be the case of the conventional meaning. By uttering the sentence “He’s in the grip of a vice” the speaker means that someone is stuck in a certain tool. But does the speaker really mean this? In the case of the first pair of notions we saw that the speaker sometimes means one thing, and sometimes not. And the intention of the speaker depends on the context. In a strict sense even if the speaker refers to a person’s inability to change a negative feature of his personality or that person’s certain part being stuck in a tool, he says the same thing, but he suggests or implies two different things. It seems then, that the speaker has two possibilities: he says something (utters a sentence) and means what he says – this would be the case of the conventional meaning; or he says something and he means something else than what was uttered. In the first case he utters p and he means p, in the second case he utters p but suggests q, or utters p and implies q.

Grice introduced the expression *to imply* as a technical term, and according to his definition he uses this expression in cases when he doesn’t want to choose between words that are part of the same family of verbs with the same meaning¹⁸. The noun *implicature* is the noun counterpart of the verb to implicate and in all the cases when we say p and suggest or imply q we are faced with an implicature. This is the case when uttering the sentence “He’s in the grip of a vice” with the meaning referring to the feature of personality.

Grice distinguishes between two major groups of implicature, that of *conventional* and *conversational implicature*.¹⁹ In case of the conventional implicature, we can think of implicatures where the conventional meaning of the words signal

¹⁷ Cf. Grice, Herbert Paul, “*Logic and Conversation*”, in Herbert Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, 2002, 24.

¹⁸ Cf. Grice, Herbert Paul, “*Logic and Conversation*”, in Herbert Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, 2002, 24.

¹⁹ Cf. Reboul, Anne, Moeschler, Jacques, *A társalgás cselei (La pragmatique aujourd’hui. Une nouvelle science de la communication)* [in Hungarian translation], Osiris Kiadó, 2006, 54.

that we are dealing with more than what it is uttered. Consider the sentence “John is an Englishman, hence he is brave”. Based on the notions that we have introduced earlier, we can analyze the sentence in the following way: it is clear that we are dealing with two sentences instead of one. The first sentence is “John is an Englishman”, the second one is “He is brave”. The personal pronoun “he” refers to “John”, and the two sentences are connected with the conjunction “hence”. By joining these two sentences together an implicature is created; the listener has the feeling that the speaker suggests that John is brave *because* John is an Englishman. From the fact that John is an Englishman follows the fact that John is brave. This implication is signaled by the presence of “hence”. The meaning of the sentence is: John is brave because John is an Englishman. For someone to be brave there is a necessary and sufficient condition, that of the person being an Englishman. This instance is a typical example of what Grice calls *conventional implicature*. In the case of a conventional implicature the meaning of the words tend to suggest a certain meaning. The conventional meaning of these words signal that we are dealing with a conventional implicature. We have several such words, like “but”, “although” (that express contrast and internal tension), “and” (expressing the link between two things; sometimes signaling the successiveness of two actions), “if... then...” (expressing the link between cause and effect, and the successiveness of two actions), etc.

The second group of implicatures are the conversational implicatures. This is the point where Grice arrives at the aspect ignored both by the formalists and the informalists. These conditions are in fact principles and rules that govern our everyday conversations. One such principle is the *cooperative principle*. The cooperative principle is a very simple presumption. According to this principle every time we engage in a conversation, we do that governed by a certain goal.²⁰ We want to discuss about a certain thing and our (common) goal governs the conversation. Only the cooperation with our peer can lead us to reach the common goal. The goal can be explicit or tacit, but no matter how it is, we always presume that there is such a goal.

And since there is a goal, there are also means with the aid of which we can reach the goal. The means in this case are rules, *conversational maxims* according to Grice, that help us reach the goal in the conversation. These are the *maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner*. According to the maxim of quantity the speaker, taking in consideration the goal of the conversation, has to provide enough information for the listener, neither less, nor more than it is needed. According to the maxim of quality the speaker’s contribution has to be true. The speaker has to

²⁰ Cf. Grice, Herbert Paul, “*Logic and Conversation*”, in Herbert Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, 2002, 26.

avoid false statements and statements that he doesn't have adequate evidence for. The maxim of relation calls our attention to relevance. The maxim of manner calls upon a clear contribution from the speaker's part.²¹

After Grice's review of the conversational maxims and the cooperative principle the question arises: do we, whenever we communicate, always obey to these principles and act upon them? It seems that we always have to take the cooperative principle into consideration, otherwise we wouldn't be able to communicate. The fact that we speak with each other presupposes that we could make our goal explicit, be they however broad. When it comes to the maxims the situation is not that simple. In case a speaker acts according to all of the maxims, everything goes according to the plan and the speaker creates a conversational implicature (utters *p* and implies *q*) without violating any of the maxims. The classic example is a short dialogue between A and B, where A says "I am out of petrol" to which B replies "There is a garage round the corner".²² In this case B implies that the garage is open and A could potentially fill up his car. The short analysis of this case would be: 1. both A and B presuppose the cooperative principle (this is a standard case of asking for help); 2. according to the maxim of quantity B provides enough information (the information is also necessary and sufficient) for A in order to help him; 3. according to the maxim of quality B uttered a true, easily verifiable statement (the garage was really around the corner); 4. B's utterance was relevant in the given situation (he replied to A's utterance); 5. according to the maxim of manner B's utterance was sufficiently clear.

The situation gets more complicated whenever the speaker violates a maxim or plain ignores it. The Griceian example in this case is the case of a professor who when asked to account for the philosophy skills of a former student, supplied the following testimonial "Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc."²³ The professor clearly implies that X's philosophy skill is questionable at best. We also presuppose the cooperative principle in this case, otherwise the professor wouldn't have had written the testimonial. It is also clear that the professor can potentially provide relevant information about his former student's philosophy skills, but he didn't. The maxim of quantity was violated here, because the speaker didn't provide enough information according to the situation.

²¹ Cf. Grice, Herbert Paul, "Logic and Conversation", in Herbert Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, 2002, 26–27.

²² Cf. Grice, Herbert Paul, "Logic and Conversation", in Herbert Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, 2002, 32.

²³ Cf. Grice, Herbert Paul, "Logic and Conversation", in Herbert Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, 2002, 33.

What happens in these cases? How does the listener know that he faces an implicature? As mentioned before the presupposition of the cooperative principle is absolutely necessary. But it is also preferable that the speaker utters a statement according to both the cooperative principle and the conversational maxims. So if we notice that the speaker ignored some of the maxims, or that the maxims were violated, we can rely on a method of inference with the help of which we can figure out the reason, why the speaker uttered the sentence that he did. The method of inference works in the following way in the testimonial's case: 1. X's former professor knows X's philosophy skills (it is impossible for him not to know more about it); 2. the professor knew that he had to provide information about X's philosophy skills; 3. despite all this, the professor barely said anything about X's philosophy skills (he violated the maxim of quantity by not providing enough information); 4. the professor didn't want to share any information about X's philosophy skill; 5. the professor had to have a low opinion on X's philosophy skill, otherwise he would have shared the information.

Grice by introducing the cooperative principle and the conversational maxims in his theory of meaning, urged others to take notice of these guiding principles. A common feature of the theories of meaning that were elaborated before Grice's theory was that they were based solely on the notion of inference rules. Just think of the formal theories of meaning. These theories all worked with a code-like image of language. The code-like theory of language considers that every sign has its conventional meaning, and that the meaning of a sentence can be reduced to the meaning of its constituent words and their places in the sentence. The basic scheme of the code-like view of language is $A \rightarrow B$, $B \rightarrow C$, $C \rightarrow D$, etc., and the basic idea is that between the antecedent and the consequent the relation is based on necessity. Such a view however has at least two difficulties. The two difficulties in form of a question are the following: how can such a view account for mistakes? and how can it account for cases of indirect speech acts?

The Difficulties of the Code-like View of Language

If we imagine language as code and reduce meaning to convention, we are unable to account for mistakes when it comes to meaning, because on the one hand the dictionary defines the meaning of a certain word, on the other hand the relation of necessity guarantees that only one consequent follows from a certain antecedent (the one that actually follows). The case of the indirect speech acts poses the same difficulty. Indirect speech acts can be defined as speech acts in case of which the

speaker utters a certain utterance and means what he says, but also means something else. A typical example of an indirect speech act is the utterance “Can you pass the salt?”. When uttering the sentence the speaker means it as a question, but also as a request; that is by uttering the utterance the speaker also requests the listener to give him the salt. But how is this possible? The conventional theory of meaning makes it impossible for us to regard a question also as a request. In this case also the meaning of the sentence is reduced to the meaning of its constituent words and their places in the sentence. And the question mark at the end of the sentence signals that we are dealing with a question. This is one potential explanation. The second potential explanation is the one presented by Searle. This is a highly complex system of deduction that we won’t expose here.²⁴

Griceian Solutions of the Difficulties

In both cases the Griceian solution is much simpler. Remember, Grice defined the non-natural meaning as the effect of the listener’s intended reaction triggered by the speaker, resulting from the fact that the listener recognizes the speaker’s intention. According to Grice the fact that we ascribe intentions to another person plays a crucial role. He presupposes that a speaker utters a certain utterance with a certain intention, and the listener will only understand the meaning of an utterance if beyond the fact that he reduces the utterance’s meaning to the meaning of the words, the listener also understands the speaker’s intention. In the cases of mistakes and indirect speech acts the listener doesn’t understand the speaker due to the fact that he does not ascribe any intention to the speaker, or because the listener cannot override and revise the intention that he initially ascribed to the speaker.

In both the cases of indirect speech acts and of the cooperative principle the listener is challenged to give further considerations to the situation. Consider once again the example “Can you pass the salt?” According to the Griceian view the listener would reason in the following way: 1. it is obvious for the speaker that I would be able to pass him the salt; 2. it would be absurd to question something that it is obvious for the speaker; 3. thus he didn’t want to ask me if I were able to pass him the salt, he wants something else: he wants me to pass him the salt.²⁵ The situation is similar in case of a mistake also. If a speaker utters the sentence “He’s in

²⁴ See Searle, John R., “*Indirect Speech Acts*” in John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 33–35.

²⁵ Cf. Reboul, Anne, Moeschler, Jacques, *A társalgás cselei (La pragmatique aujourd’hui. Une nouvelle science de la communication)* [in Hungarian translation], Osiris Kiadó, 2006, 57.

the grip of a vice”, the listener will know that the speaker referred to the fact that someone was unable to change a negative feature of his personality because: 1. the listener presupposes the cooperative principle; 2. the listener knows that the speaker’s remark of someone being stuck in a certain tool wouldn’t make any sense in the context of the conversation (the maxim of relation would be overlooked); 3. based on 1. and 2. the listener arrives at the conclusion that the speaker couldn’t have referred to someone being stuck in a tool; 4. the listener concludes that the speaker meant something else when uttering the sentence: he must have intended that someone couldn’t change one of the negative features of his personality. We see that according to the Griceian theory the listener’s interpretation doesn’t end with the first impediment. When facing a difficulty, the listener is trying to trace interpretational options based on both the cooperative principle and the conversational maxims. According to the goal of conversation and its context the listener sets out certain hypotheses in order to be able to find the best possible meaning of an utterance.

Conclusion

The problem of meaning seems to be a huge challenge for linguists, philosophers and researchers of artificial intelligence. The code-like view of language, as we have seen, tends to simplify the problem in such a way, that it almost makes progress impossible. This kind of theory cannot account for as simple issues as the ones raised by mistakes or indirect speech acts. In contrast, the Griceian view can explain both the phenomenon of mistakes and indirect speech acts. It does this by allowing the listener to ascribe intentions to the speaker, and also by claiming that the listener while trying to tackle the problem of meaning sketches certain hypotheses according to the cooperative principle and the conversational maxims. This strategy helps the listener decide and define the meaning of words and utterances in all cases.

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