

Meaning without Gricean Intentions

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Forthcoming in *Analysis*

(This is a penultimate draft)

Abstract

Gricean theories analyse meaning in terms of certain complex intentions on the part of the speaker—the intention to produce an effect on the addressee, and the intention to have that intention recognized by the addressee. By drawing an analogy with cases widely discussed in action theory, we propose a novel counterexample where the speaker lacks these intentions, but nonetheless means something, and successfully performs a speech act.

1. Introduction

Gricean theories analyse meaning in terms of certain complex intentions on the part of the speaker. There are disagreements about the details among Griceans, but what is common to all is that for the speaker to mean something, they are supposed to intend to produce certain effects on the addressee, and to have that intention recognized by the addressee. A Gricean analysis of particular kinds of speech acts is then built *on top of* this analysis of meaning: for example, according to the Gricean, to ask something might require intending to elicit some information from the addressee, and to have that intention recognized by the addressee, in part on the basis of meaning something by a particular utterance, which in turn is analysed as above. Though they have fallen under attack from many fronts (e.g., Buchanan 2010; Lepore and Stone 2015), Gricean theories of meaning are still very prominent, with several recent proponents (e.g.,

Harris 2014; Unnsteinsson 2022; Keiser 2022) in addition to the more classical ones (Grice 1969, 1975; Schiffer 1972; Neale 1992).

In this paper, by drawing an analogy with cases widely discussed in action theory, we develop a novel challenge against Gricean theories of meaning, arguing that there is a class of cases where the speaker means something and performs certain speech acts, but has neither of the intentions mentioned above—i.e., does not intend to produce those particular effects on the addressee, and does not want their intentions to be recognized by the addressee. If this is right, we will have provided one more reason to think that meaning does not need Gricean intentions.

2. *The Cunning Citizen*

There are two rigidly separated castes, each with its own language, one unrelated to the other; one caste—the citizens—speaks language C; and the other caste—the priests—speaks language P. It is rigidly enforced that citizens and priests do not speak one another's languages. One cunning citizen plans to rob a monastery where both priests and citizens live—the latter work there as caretakers. In order to disguise himself more effectively, our citizen secretly learns P in addition to C. So when it is dark, he steals some of the priests' gold, planning to then escape through the underground. However, in the darkness, he gets lost. From a distance, somebody is approaching but there is no way to tell whether it is a priest or a citizen. And he has to quickly figure out where the entrance of the underground is, since his escape vehicle leaves at the other end in two minutes. Knowing that it might be his only chance to get directions and it is too dark for the approaching person to figure out that he is a citizen rather than a priest, the cunning citizen thinks to himself: "Both the library and the church are close to the entrance of the underground. And the same sequence of sounds happens to mean two different questions in P

and in C: “Where is the access to the library?” and “In what direction is the chapel?”. If the person approaching is a citizen, they will only interpret my question in C, since they cannot know P; and if it is a priest, they will only interpret the question in P. Either way, I will get directions to the underground.” So he makes those sounds.

We claim that, if the person the cunning citizen is addressing is a priest (but not a citizen), they will correctly take him to have asked, and he will have asked them, where the access to the library is. Furthermore, he will have meant what we, in English, would mean when we ask “Where is the access to the library?” This is in spite of the fact that he did not have the intention to ask that very question in particular, since either one will have worked for his purpose and since he did not know what language his addressee was speaking.

These sorts of cases raise a problem for Gricean theories of meaning and of speech acts which require that the speaker have a specific communicative intention about a specific content, one that the audience needs to recognize for the illocutionary act to be successful (§3). We argue that some of the simpler Gricean responses to our cases face significant problems (§4) and we discuss in what ways our challenge differs from other challenges levelled against Gricean theories of meaning in the literature (§5). Finally, we argue that some possible revisions will not fully overcome the problem without some non-trivial costs (§6).

3. *Gricean theories of meaning*

The part of the Gricean theory of language that we are concerned with comes in two stages: it involves a theory of meaning as well as a theory of illocutionary acts. The theory of meaning is foundational, with the theory of speech acts built on top of it, so any problem for the former is a problem for the latter. But we think it useful to go through both, because intuitions

may be less clear about *meaning*—a somewhat technical notion—and clearer about *asking*, a fairly common sense notion. We believe that cases such as Cuning Citizen present a challenge to *both parts*—which is hardly surprising, since they are supposed to work together.

Here is a classic formulation of Grice’s theory of meaning (1969: 165):

“By uttering *x*, *U* meant something” is true iff for some audience *A*, *U* uttered *x* intending: (1) *A* to produce some particular response *r*, (2) *A* to recognize that *U* intends (1), and (3) *A*’s recognition that *U* intends (1) to function, in part, as a reason for (1).

The crucial feature of this formulation, and others similar to it, is that in order to mean something, one needs to intend to produce a particular response, and for the audience to recognize that intention.¹ The theory of illocutionary acts is built on top of the theory of meaning, since the speaker must mean something in order to ask, assert, or promise. Here is a representative Gricean analysis of asking *wh-* questions, which entails the requirement that the speaker mean something in order to ask a question:²

“*S* asks *wh-* is *F* in uttering *u* iff *S* utters *u* intending: (1) to produce thereby in *A* an intention to inform *S* that *x* is *F* (Δ); (2) *A* to recognize *S*’s intention (1); (3) *A*’s response Δ to be at least partly on the basis of her recognition of (1) and *A*’s recognition of *S*’s desire to know *wh-* is *F* (ρ).” (Harris 2014: 8)

¹ See also Neale (1992: 550).

² Other analyses, e.g. Schiffer (1972), contain such a claim explicitly.

Different speech acts will require different things from the speaker, but they all involve an intention to produce certain effects, and the hearer's recognition of that intention.

We are now in position to make our case against Gricean views. Our intuition is that the cunning citizen succeeds in asking a question about the library. This seems hard to deny: the addressee will simply answer his question, and they will not have misunderstood him if they did so. Gricean analyses, however, predict otherwise, because the cunning citizen does not intend to ask about the library in particular since getting an answer to either question will do for his purposes and since he has no idea which language is spoken by his addressee. He also cannot intend the addressee to recognize the intention to ask about the library, since he does not have that intention, and recognition entails truth. So he lacks the response-related intention required by Grice's analysis, and he does not want his addressee to recognize the intention he does have.

Our main argument relies on our intuitions about a case. Since intuitions can be fickle things, next we show that the intuitions generalise to structurally similar non-linguistic cases, which we take to be good evidence that our intuitions track something real.

4. The analogy with Bratman (1984)

Cunning Citizen bears a structure parallel to Bratman's (1984) classic video game example. Here, Jenny is playing a video game, where the goal is to shoot one of two different targets. Jenny will win only if she shoots exactly one target and she loses if she shoots both. However, shooting either target is difficult, so her best strategy is to fire at both targets simultaneously, hoping to only hit one of them. Suppose Jenny hits the leftmost target, winning the game. It seems she succeeded at hitting the leftmost target and that she did so intentionally. The same would be true if she successfully hit the rightmost target. All of this is also perfectly

rational. But intending to hit both targets would be irrational, since Jenny does not want to lose. She just intended to hit *any* one of them.

Two analogies between Cunning Citizen and Bratman's case are relevant to our argument. The first is that, just like Jenny does not intend to hit both targets on pain of irrationality, the citizen does not intend to ask both the question "Where is the access to the library?" and the question "In what direction is the chapel?" Asking both questions would mean speaking two different languages, and intending to do that, in that situation, would be irrational (since it would amount to endangering himself). Moreover, it seems very plausible that he does not intend to ask either one of the two questions *in particular*—just like in Bratman's example, Jenny did not intend to hit either one of the two targets in particular, since any one will do (*Intention Analogy*). The second analogy is that, just like in Bratman's example Jenny successfully hit one of the two video game targets, the cunning citizen will have asked one of the two questions (i.e., Where is the access to the library?) if his audience is indeed a priest (*Action Analogy*).

If both the Intention Analogy and the Action Analogy are correct, the cunning citizen asked a question about the library, even though he did not have the particular intention to produce in the audience the intention to answer that question; nor did he intend his audience to recognize an intention which he does not have. So, Cunning Citizen is a counterexample to Gricean theories of asking. For similar reasons, it raises a problem for Gricean theories of meaning.

Importantly, the counterexample does not rely on the details of the case. Firstly, nothing depends on special features of the speech act of *asking*: similar cases can be easily constructed for any speech act. So the problem generalises to Gricean analyses of all illocutionary acts. Nor

does the story have to be all that convoluted. We might imagine a more realistic scenario in which a spy knows different codes and uses the same sequence of sounds to ask different questions depending on which code is known by the addressee. Finally, while in *Cunning Citizen*, there are two possible languages for interpreting an utterance—the language of the priests and the language of the citizens—similar cases can be envisaged without this language feature. Consider a variant in which a speaker might utter “Can you pass the salt?”, uncertain of whether the addressee will take them to have asked a question or to have made an order, with the intention to make either speech act depending on the speaker’s take. In this case, like in *Cunning Citizen*, the speaker need not intend to perform either of the two speech acts in particular. Rather, it seems that the speaker means a question only conditionally on the addressee taking them to have asked a question and means an order only conditionally on the addressee taking them to have issued an order.

How could the Gricean reply to our style of counterexample? One first possible response is to contend that in *Cunning Citizen*, *both* questions are asked and meant. A second possible response is that *neither* question is asked. By exploiting the structural analogy with Bratman’s example, we suggest that neither response is satisfactory.

4.1 Many questions asked

According to the first response, the cunning citizen asked and meant both questions: “Where is the access to the library?” and “In what direction is the chapel?” The parallel with Bratman (1984) highlights why this response is not compelling. By the lights of a Gricean theory of meaning, for each question one means, one also intends the audience to recognize what kind of

response one intended. But our citizen cannot want his addressee to recognize that he has the intention to ask *both* questions, since that would put them in position to figure out that he speaks two languages and that is prohibited. Moreover, this style of response is particularly implausible in a variant of our case involving *orders*. Suppose the same sound expresses in two different languages two incompatible commands—such as the command to bring only a glass of champagne and to bring only a glass of water. Here, it would be particularly implausible to contend that, if one produced that sound with the intention to make either request depending on the language spoken by their addressee, one would be thereby making contradictory requests.

Let the intention to ϕ be the *particular intention to ϕ* and let the intention to both ϕ and ψ be the *conjunctive intention to ϕ and ψ* . Could the cunning citizen have the particular intentions to ask about the library and to ask about the chapel, without having *the conjunctive intention to ask both questions*? The answer is ‘No’ if the principle known as ‘agglomeration for intentions’ holds. According to agglomeration, if S intends to ϕ and S intends to ψ , then S is rationally required to have the conjunctive intention to ϕ and ψ .³ Since, as we have seen, the cunning citizen cannot have the conjunctive intention, it follows by agglomeration he cannot have both particular intentions either. (And of course, if he lacks either particular intention, considerations of symmetry compel us to say that he lacks the other, as well.) However, agglomeration for intentions is controversial and for this reason it is unwise to rest our argument on it.⁴ No matter, for intuitions are on our side: we directly *intuit* that our speaker did not have the particular intention to ask about the library nor the particular intention to ask about the chapel. In this respect, our case is just like Bratman’s. It is intuitive that Jenny does not have the particular

³See Bratman (1985: 220-1) for a defence of agglomeration.

⁴Goldstein (2016) offers an interesting counterexample to agglomeration: consider a traveller who intends to visit each of twenty cathedrals but also intends not to visit all of them, since she knows that she lacks the money to see them all but is not sure which cathedral she might miss.

intention to hit the leftmost target, nor the particular intention to hit the rightmost target; after all, shooting either target will do for Jenny's purpose. Likewise, it is intuitive that the cunning citizen did not have either of the particular intentions, since asking either question will do for his purpose.

4.2 *No questions asked*

According to a second response, no question was asked in Cunning Citizen. Since, intuitively, he *did* ask about the library, this response amounts to an error theory. Such an error theory comes with substantial costs. It is hard to deny that he succeeded at asking *a* question—after all, we can imagine the communicative exchange to continue successfully, with the audience offering the required information. Moreover, this response entails that certain successful communicative exchanges are not *really* cases of meaning. This consequence strikes us as implausible when the communicative exchange in question is intentional, as in the case of Cunning Citizen. Then this response amounts to denying that every case of *intentional* communication is a case of meaning and, thus, to a substantial resizing of the purported scope of Gricean theories.

5. *Comparisons*

Our challenge to Gricean theories of meaning significantly differs from other challenges recently raised to them. Let us begin with Lepore & Stone's (2015: 218) objection from malapropisms. Consider the utterance of "I jeopardise you to handle my duties." Here, the speaker intended to use "jeopardise" with its regular meaning (and thus in some sense intended to say something about jeopardising) but they also intended to deputise the addressee. And yet, intuitively, they

only said something about jeopardising, with the Gricean left to explain why one intention (to use “jeopardise”) matters, and the other one (to deputise) does not.

Our case differs from this challenge in some important ways. First, the problem in the case described of malapropism is *which intention trumps which*. In our cases, instead, intuitively speakers lack the respective intentions. Second, malapropisms can be taken care of by simply requiring tight connections to the conventional meaning of terms (Grice 1975: 43), or to what the hearer takes that meaning to be (Grice 1969: 162-164): what gets said is that which is more closely related to the conventional meaning of the term uttered. This solution does not apply to Cunning Citizen, since both interpretations are the conventional meaning of the sentence uttered, relative to the two different languages. A final point worth emphasising is that malapropism cases (by definition) involve some error or confusion on the part of the speaker, whereas the cunning citizen is neither confused nor in error. Thus, our argument raises a different, and perhaps more serious problem, to the Gricean reductive program, since it shows that even speakers who are free from error can generate counterexamples to the analysis.

Compare now our challenge to Buchanan (2010)’s. Buchanan (2010) also objects to the Gricean claim that the speaker must intend to communicate a particular proposition. At this level of generality, our challenge is similar. However, Buchanan’s (2010) arguments concern in particular *underspecification*. He points out (2010: 350) that, for example, in cases of quantifier domain restrictions—e.g. “the bucket [in the backyard / next to the hot tub / decorated with a pirate motif...] is empty”—the speaker need not have in mind a particular choice of specification, let alone intend their audience to recognize their having meant any particular specification, and yet communication succeeds. By contrast, the point we are making with Cunning Citizen does not involve a lack of specificity in the content of the speaker’s linguistic

intention (although “the bucket” may well raise issues about specificity).⁵ Indeed, our cunning citizen is *very* clear about what alternative meanings his utterance can be taken to have. So, our discussion differs from Buchanan (2010) in that it shows that problems arise for Gricean theories of meaning even in cases which involve no underspecification.

6. *Possible revisions?*

Can Gricean theories of meaning be revised so as to account for our cases without losing the spirit of their account? The simplest Gricean solution is to say that, although the cunning citizen does not have the conjunctive intention to ask both questions, nor each particular intention, he has a *disjunctive intention*—i.e., the intention to either ask one question or the other—and the addressee must recognize *one of the disjuncts*. But that seems insufficiently general: after all, could not one have a more complicated plan? Indeed, we could envisage increasingly more complicated cases that realise virtually any Boolean operation on intentions—not just disjunctions. For example, suppose there are three permitted languages A, B, and C, but while knowing both A and B and knowing both A and C are permitted, knowing both B and C is forbidden, and further suppose the speaker has an intention to be recognized as speaking C only if not recognized as also speaking B. Appealing to increasingly more complexly structured intentions to deal with increasingly complicated cases like this seems rather *ad hoc*.

Another amendment might be to allow Gricean’s theories to encompass *conditional intentions*—e.g., in Cunning Citizen, the intention to ask about the library conditionally on the audience being a priest. More generally, one could take the view according to which a speaker S

⁵If the use of a definite description such as “the bucket” is distracting—since many things might fit the descriptor—our case could be made with proper names, or within a world where there is a single bucket, or about the first prime natural number, etc.

means p by an utterance u only if they conditionally intend the following (given that some condition c is met):

- (1) To produce a particular response r in an addressee A ;
- (2) For A to attribute an intention with content (1) to S ;
- (3) For r to be the result of A 's attribution of (1) to S .

On this view, our cunning citizen can mean both questions by virtue of having two different conditional intentions, for (2) no longer entails that both conditional intentions are to be recognized by the addressee. Rather, the intention attributed by the addressee is the unconditional intention in (1) (e.g., to ask about the library), which the citizen does not actually have. This constitutes an element of departure from classical Gricean theories, for on this account, the intention that the hearer must attribute to the speaker is not the same as the intention that the speaker does have, since the former intentional is unconditional, and the latter is conditional. A further consequence of this revision is that we lose the classical Gricean thought that the addressee must *recognize*—not merely attribute—the relevant intention. After all, recognizing an intention entails knowing, or at least truly believing, that the speaker had the intention. And in Cunning Citizen, we have an addressee attributing a full intention to the speaker when they only had a conditional intention. So this account also departs from standard Gricean formulations (see §3) in that it has to weaken the ‘recognition’ requirement, so as to allow that the audience’s attribution of intention be possibly false.⁶

7. Conclusion

⁶Grice (1969:151) might be open to this weakening, since he hedges between “think” (non-factive) and “recognize” (factive). Others are more adamant that the recognition of the intention must be factive or even amount to knowledge. See, e.g., Scanlon (1990) on promises.

Looking at it from far enough, the reader is likely to find that we have not argued against the core of the Gricean idea that meaning something is to be analysed in terms of the speaker intending to have certain effects on the audience, and the audience figuring out something about the speaker's intentions. We have, however, argued on the basis of intuitions that the *particular* kinds of intentions used in Gricean theories cannot account for cases like Cunning Citizen: these seem to be cases where the speaker's intentions are more complicated than what Griceans suppose, and where the speaker specifically does not want those intentions to be recognized by the audience.

Where does this leave Gricean views? We see three options. One is to reject the cases. We have argued briefly that there are costs associated with this strategy (§4.2). The second option is to construe Gricean theories as *functionalist*: as claims about the proper function of meaning and of speech acts, while allowing that there are other ways to mean, and to perform a speech act.⁷ The third option we have sketched (§6) is to allow for more complicated intentions into the theory, and to allow differences between what the speaker intended and what the audience is supposed to figure out. We think this is the more promising way forward.

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⁷ See Unnsteinsson (2022) for a possible model.

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