

MEANING AND MIND

*An Examination of
a Gricean Account
of Language*

Anita Avramides

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To the memory of my father

Preface

This book examines Gricean accounts of meaning. My interest in this topic goes back to 1979, when I was bringing together thoughts for a D.Phil. thesis. I was struck by two things. The first was the essential richness of Grice's original ideas on meaning. The second was what appeared to be a rejection of those ideas by many whose work I admired. Counterexamples to Grice's analysis of meaning excited most attention in the literature that followed the publication of Grice's 1957 paper. My own interest never lay in counterexamples, but the more I learned about the development of the analysis of meaning in response to the counterexamples, the more perplexed I became by the rejection of the analysis. I wanted to understand what was wrong with an analysis that seemed to work so well. This is the reason for chapter 2, which outlines the development of the analysis in some detail. It is no exaggeration to say that this is one of the most successfully developed analyses in the philosophical literature.

One needs to draw a firm distinction between two different interpretations of the analysis of meaning, the one reductive and the other reciprocal, as I labeled it. I became convinced that it was only the reductive interpretation that many were rejecting, and that because no distinction was made between interpretations, it appeared that the analysis itself was being rejected. This tendency was encouraged by the writings of the early followers of Grice's work, Stephen Schiffer and Brian Loar, who took Grice's original analysis in a reductive direction. Schiffer wrote his book *Meaning* in 1972, but not until the early 1980s did he become explicit about his program, which he called "intention-based semantics." The aim of the program is to reduce the semantic to the psychological, and to make this reduction part of the even larger program of reducing the semantic and the psychological to the physical. (See chapter 1, section 5.) While Schiffer and Loar developed this program in their newer work, I concentrated on what was *wrong* with the reductive interpretation of Grice's early work.

Ideas in this area developed rapidly. Not only were Schiffer and

Loar exploring intention-based semantics in enormous detail; Grice himself after a long silence contributed a couple of articles to the discussion of the analysis. Yet Grice has never embraced intention-based semantics. In 1986 Richard Grandy and Richard Warner brought out a collection of papers devoted to Grice's work, some of which contributed to the issue of meaning. Schiffer himself has now written *The Remnants of Meaning*, repudiating his work in intention-based semantics. I have tried to incorporate much of this new literature into my work, but Schiffer's most recent ideas appeared too late for me to comment on them here.

The style and structure of the first two chapters are rather different from the later ones. Chapter 1 explores the place of Grice's work on meaning in the larger context of other approaches to the problem, introduces the distinction between reductive and reciprocal interpretations of the analysis, and explains the program of intention-based semantics. Chapter 2 deals with the analysis itself. In chapters 3 and 4 I explain my interpretation of what is involved in the claim to reduce the semantic to the psychological, and I present my reasons for thinking that such an approach to the understanding of meaning and mind is misguided.

The heart of the book is chapter 3. There I argue that the Gricean does not aim to support his reductive claim with the observation that we can come to know another's beliefs and intentions in advance of understanding his language. This is significant since at least some of those who reject Grice's work appear to do so on the grounds that such an epistemological asymmetry is false. But if this asymmetry does not support the reduction, what does? I argue that we must find an asymmetry advocated by the reductive Gricean but rejected by his antireductionist opponent. I consider the suggestion that the dispute centers on the ontological issue of whether there can be thought without language: the Gricean accepts such an asymmetry, and the antireductionist rejects it. I argue that the antireductionist need not reject ontological asymmetry. The dispute, I suggest, is not over the issue of ontological symmetry versus asymmetry, but over the *conception* of mind. I argue that to reduce the semantic to the psychological is to commit oneself to the idea that the mind is an essentially objective phenomenon that can be comprehended from an external, detached, and impersonal perspective. To understand meaning, we must first be clear about the conception of mind with which we are working. It is easy to argue that specific reductive Griceans are committed to a conception of mind as an objective phenomenon; the more difficult task is to argue that a Gricean is committed by his reduction of the semantic to the psychological to such an objective conception of

mind. Yet I believe this to be true, and I argue my case in chapter 4. I also suggest an alternative, subjective conception of mind, which, I argue, is incompatible with a Gricean reduction.

Over the years I have worked on this topic I have benefited from discussion with several people. In shaping the material for an Oxford D.Phil., I was supervised first by Michael Woods and then by John McDowell. John McDowell greatly aided the development of my ideas, especially in chapters 3 and 4. John Biro, Hartry Field, Adrian Moore, Stephen Schiffer, and Galen Strawson read some very early drafts. Stephen Schiffer also provided helpful comments on the completed manuscript. Both of my thesis examiners, Paul Snowden and P. F. Strawson, made helpful and encouraging comments. Katherine Morris commented usefully on chapter 4. I am grateful to several anonymous referees of the manuscript and most especially to Richard Warner, whose detailed reading of the completed manuscript proved invaluable. I would like to thank the Queen's College, Oxford for a sabbatical leave. I am indebted to Colin McGinn for years of discussion and support. Finally, I would like to thank Karen Zaffos and Steven Zaffos for their invaluable help in preparing the index.

Meaning and Mind

Contents

Preface ix

Chapter 1

Approaches to Meaning 1

1 *Historical Perspective* 1

2 *Two Approaches to the Problem of Meaning* 7

3 *Two Kinds of Analysis* 19

4 *The Place of Grice's Work in an Overall Account of Meaning* 26

5 *A Reductive Analysis of Meaning* 33

Chapter 2

The Analysis of Meaning 39

1 *The Basic Analysis* 40

2 *Is the Analysis Sufficient?* 46

3 *Is the Analysis Necessary?* 58

4 *Timeless Meaning* 67

5 *Structure* 75

Chapter 3

Asymmetry 77

1 *Surface Epistemological Asymmetry* 83

2 *The Davidsonian Doubt* 84

3 *Reduction and Surface Epistemological Asymmetry* 91

4 *Deep Epistemological Asymmetry* 93

5 *The Reduction of the Psychological to the Physical* 98

6 *Deep Epistemological Asymmetry Continued* 104

7 *Ontological Asymmetry* 111

8 *Does a Deep Epistemological Asymmetry Entail Ontological Asymmetry?* 112

9 *Does an Ontological Asymmetry Entail Deep Epistemological Asymmetry?* 115

10 *Davidson's Argument* 119

Chapter 4

Meaning and Mind 127

1 *The Objective Conception of Mind* 130

2 *A Mistaken Picture of Mind* 138

3 *Functionalism* 147

4 *A Subjective Conception of Mind* 156

5 *The Semantic and the Psychological* 160

Notes 169

References 191

Index 197

Chapter 1

Approaches to Meaning

1 Historical Perspective

The problem is to give an adequate and illuminating account of the concept of meaning. In the past there have been many varied attempts to do this. There is no easy nonmisleading way to summarize or classify these attempts, but some rude organization of the material may help to provide a place for the account of meaning that H. P. Grice introduced into the philosophical world in 1957 and that is the subject of this book.¹

It is unclear whether or not it is useful to view Grice's work as furthering some preexisting approach to the problem of meaning. What is true is that Grice, in his first paper on the topic, considers and rejects the causal approach to meaning found in the writings of C. L. Stevenson.² This approach has its roots in the stimulus-response theories of J. B. Watson.³ The causal approach to meaning is thus directly associated with the school of radical behaviorism that became prominent in the first part of the twentieth century. Causal theorists recognize that to account for meaning one must pay attention to the role of speakers and hearers. Their behaviorist roots require that whatever it is about speakers and hearers that is relevant to meaning should be accessible to observation. The initial idea, drawn from Pavlov's work on conditioned responses in dogs, is to identify the meaning of a word with the response a certain sound (or mark) induces in the hearer. This idea is in need of substantial modification, however, if for no other reason than that in this crude form the constancy of meaning is lost in the welter of possible responses.

Stevenson identifies the dilemma confronting the theorist of meaning in the following way: on the one hand, if a word is divorced from the "psychological habits" of those who use it, it "becomes devoid of any referent [and] no more interesting than any other complex noise"; on the other hand, the meaning of a word is (relatively) constant, while the psychological states of speakers are in constant flux.⁴ Stevenson suggests that the way out of this dilemma is to identify

meaning with a dispositional property of a word; the crucial psychological processes come in as responses to the word. Meaning, then, is said to be a disposition of a sign to affect certain responses in a hearer. Stevenson is careful to add: "A sign's disposition to affect a hearer is to be called a 'meaning' . . . only if it has been caused by, and would not have developed without, an elaborate process of conditioning which has attended the sign's use in communication."⁵ In other words, not just anything that has a tendency to produce a certain response in another is a case of meaning. To see this consider Grice's example:⁶ Putting on a tail coat may lead some observer to conclude that the wearer of the coat is about to go to a dance. But we would not want to say that putting on a tail coat *meant* anything (in the sense these philosophers are interested in).⁷ Grice is aware that his counterexample would be ruled out by Stevenson's insistence that the conditioning which leads to the response be the result of "the sign's use in communication." However, as Grice points out, this excludes the unwanted case only at the cost of introducing a circularity into the proposed account of meaning. We want an account of precisely what makes something a *communicative* use of a sign.

Having offered a few perfunctory criticisms of causal theories, Grice then proceeds to offer a "different and . . . more promising line."⁸ The most notable feature of this "new line" is its unselfconscious employment of such concepts as intention and belief. For reasons having nothing to do with the antimentalistic scruples of Grice's predecessors and contemporaries, some of the most difficult problems with Grice's account of meaning still center around the understanding of these concepts, as I shall soon explain.

It is interesting to consider what relation Grice's account of meaning has to the "ideational theories" of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.⁹ Such a theory is to be found, for example, in the writings of John Locke. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke speaks as if language is essentially an instrument for the communication of some preformed and otherwise invisible thought. Words are "marks for the ideas within [the speaker's] own mind," and where those "internal conceptions" are absent, the sounds we associate with language are as insignificant as the articulations of a parrot.¹⁰ According to Locke the speaker uses words as signs (or marks) of his ideas; communication is achieved when the words excite the same ideas in the hearer as they are made to stand for in the speaker. In this way the content of the utterance (what it is about) is said to derive from the content of the thoughts with which it is associated. Locke thus writes:

The comfort and advantage of society not being to be had without communication of thought, it was necessary that man should find some external signs, whereof those invisible ideas, which his thoughts are made up of, might be known to others. . . . The use, then, of words is to be sensible marks of ideas; and the ideas they stand for are their proper and immediate signification.¹¹

This account of meaning is part of Locke's general empiricist account of concepts: words are associated with ideas, and all ideas derive ultimately from experience. According to Locke and the empiricists, then, one accounts for the meaning (signification) attached to utterances by reference to the ideas for which they stand.¹² But this raises the question of how we are to understand the signification that *ideas* have. To say that all ideas are derived from experience is to gesture in the direction we should look, but it alone provides few answers. Furthermore, since ideas depend on the subject, it is hard to see how reference to them can be used to explain the commonality of language. This account of meaning also raises the question of how that signification that ideas are said to have is conveyed from the idea to the utterance. To say that words are "external signs" of ideas, to suggest that words serve to encode ideas,¹³ is merely to describe the phenomenon; it provides no explanation of how it occurs.¹⁴

It was questions like these that led to much criticism of ideational theories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Michael Dummett, this conception of language was "first clearly repudiated by Frege."¹⁵ Frege's criticism was closely followed by Wittgenstein's.¹⁶ Grice's work on meaning was published after these criticisms were well established, yet it is not entirely clear how to place Grice's work with respect to them. The issue is pressing owing to the central role allotted to speakers' psychological states in Grice's account of meaning. Consideration of ideational theories and criticism of them raise several specific questions about Grice's work. First of all, what account are we to give of the intentions and beliefs that are mentioned on the right-hand side of the analytic biconditional?¹⁷ As we consider this question, another, more fundamental question arises: if we say that the way meaning attaches to utterances can be analyzed in terms of speakers' intentions to produce certain beliefs in an audience, what are we to say about what is meant? It looks as if the theorist of meaning can be seen as having two tasks: one is to say how utterances have meaning; the other is to say something about that meaning. If this is right, we can ask which task Grice saw himself as discharging. I would argue that Grice's concern is not

with the issue of content *per se* but with understanding how utterances have their content. His suggestion is that to understand how utterances have their content we must understand how intentions and beliefs have their content, for the former is definable in terms of the latter. Understood in this way, Grice's work still leaves open a very important issue: how is it that intentions and beliefs have their content?

Understanding how Grice's work relates to ideational theories is far from a straightforward matter. It requires first that we understand how to interpret Grice's work. In sections 3 and 4 of this chapter I discuss different possible interpretations of Grice's analysis. In chapter 3 I proceed to investigate one prominent interpretation in some depth. It is not until I have done this that I return in chapter 4 to the question of the relation Grice's work has to ideational theories of meaning.

Frege's work in the philosophy of language is sometimes thought to mark a shift from ideational or code conceptions of language to a more formal approach. In the first half of the twentieth century the logical apparatus developed largely by Frege and Russell was brought to bear on language. The formal semanticists were interested not in natural language as such but in a purely formal structure, which may or may not be abstracted from natural language. Their concern was mainly with the sentences of this abstract and formal language and with the entailment relations that hold between them. From Frege onward these formal philosophers insisted that the job of any adequate theory of meaning was to give an account of the following features of language: (1) that the sentence is the primary bearer of meaning; (2) that the sense of a sentence is determined by the sense of its constituent elements; and (3) that the sense of a sentence constituent is determined by its contribution to the sense of any sentence in which it occurs.¹⁸ The second of these features is what accounts for the property often thought to be most distinctive of language, namely, that from a finite stock of semantic primitives a language user can understand and construct a potentially infinite variety of sentences.¹⁹

Around the 1950s purely formal theories came under attack. The attack is to be found in the work of the later Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin. Whereas the formal theorists had concentrated on the structure and interrelations among sentences in the indicative mood, abstracting from the ambiguity and imprecision of natural languages, these use theorists, as they came to be called, argued that imprecision and ambiguity are of the essence of the expressive power of language, that the use of language to describe the world is only one among

many of its uses, and that language cannot properly be studied in abstraction from its daily use. Despite their differences, formal theorists and use theorists concurred in at least one thing: both agreed that the sentence is the primary bearer of meaning. However, in the shift of emphasis from words to sentences, use theorists took the opportunity also to emphasize the role of speakers. John Searle writes that the influence of the later Wittgenstein and Austin "recasts the discussion of many of the problems in the philosophy of language into the larger context of the discussion of human action and behaviour generally. . . . Instead of seeing the relations between words and the world as something existing *in vacuo*, one now sees them as involving intentional actions by speakers."²⁰ It is natural to locate Grice in this tradition.

Clearly Grice's account of meaning does bring the philosophy of language within the scope of the philosophy of mind and the theory of action. His account may be said to have its roots in the simple observation that noises and marks have meaning only insofar as they are the expression of some individual's intention to communicate.²¹ Donald Davidson also draws on this observation when he writes:

Someone who utters the sentence "The candle is out" as a sentence of English must intend to utter words that are true if and only if an indicated candle is out at the time of utterance, and he must believe that by making the sounds he does he is uttering words that are true only under those circumstances. These intentions and beliefs are not apt to be dwelt on by the fluent speaker. But though they may not normally command attention, their absence would be enough to show that he was not speaking English, and the absence of any analogous thoughts would show that he was not speaking at all.²²

Observations such as these suggest that it must be right to bring the philosophy of language within the scope of the philosophy of mind. However, in recognizing this important feature of language one must not lose sight of another, equally important feature: the fact that the meaning of a sentence is built up from the meanings of words, in accordance with the rules of combination governing the language. Formal theorists may have erred in their apparent omission of any mention of the beliefs and intentions of speakers in their account of meaning, but in correcting this omission use theorists must not lose sight of the fact that any adequate account of language must give an account of its structural and recursive features.

Now if one looks at Grice's 1957 paper on meaning, one finds no mention of structure. One thing that might be said to explain the omission is the following: Grice is concerned primarily with meaning, a phenomenon which occurs both in language and outside it.²³ But the kind of structure emphasized and so well understood by the formal semanticists is only found in language.²⁴ As one Gricean writes: "The notion defined is intended to be fully general, and to cover all communication, from a caveman's tentative grunts to the orations of Cicero."²⁵ An account wide enough to cover meaning quite generally may be one that can relegate the question of structure to secondary status. It is arguable that this is Grice's strategy. Grice never denies the importance of structure to language, and it is clear that Grice intends his account of meaning to serve as an account of linguistic meaning.²⁶ Nevertheless, his primary purpose is to give an account of the more general feature of meaning.

Once Grice's strategy is understood, it is less clear whether he is solely a use theorist.²⁷ Indeed, it is unclear whether anyone was or is solely a use or solely a formal theorist of meaning. Neither the structural features of a language nor the obvious connections with speakers' psychological states can ultimately be ignored when giving an account of meaning. In fact several philosophers have thought that formal semanticists and use theorists are not really in direct competition. David Wiggins writes: "Nothing that has happened since J. L. Austin's 1950 lectures 'Words and Deeds' or their publication [1962] seems to me to have undermined or made obsolete the kind of semantic theory typified by Frege or Russell or, in our times, by Carnap."²⁸ And Searle echoes this: "Although historically there have been sharp disagreements between practitioners of these two approaches [one which concentrates on the use of expressions in speech situations and one which concentrates on the meaning of sentences], it is important to realize that the two approaches . . . are complementary and not competing."²⁹

It is easy to see that some reconciliation is necessary; it is much harder to explain how that reconciliation is to proceed. If we think of the program of accounting for meaning as the wider enterprise of which giving a Gricean account of use is only one part, while some more formal theory accounting for structure is another part, then we must ask how these parts fit together. There is no quick answer to this question. I believe that this question compels us to reflect upon our general conception of the semantic and the psychological, both individually and as part of a larger whole. This conceptual issue determines which interpretation we choose to give of the Gricean analysis, and the interpretation we give will determine our view of the re-

conciliation. The question of interpretation, then, is prior to that of reconciliation.

However, when the concept we seek to understand is meaning, we can address the question of interpretation only after we agree that the method of analysis is appropriately applied. Some philosophers have argued that our concept of meaning is one that the method of analysis does not suit. Obviously, such an argument would, if correct, completely undermine Grice's work on meaning. In the next section I shall consider some of these arguments. In section 3 I consider the question of interpretation, and in section 4 I discuss reconciliation. It is not until chapter 3 that I fully explain my claim that interpretation is affected by one's general conception of the semantic and the psychological.

2 Two Approaches to the Problem of Meaning

The problem of meaning is not the problem of giving an account of the meaning of the words and sentences in this or that particular language. The problem is a more general one. The question is: how are we to understand the obvious fact that certain noises and marks have significance for individuals, that they can be used to convey information, command another to act, and much more? This phenomenon, so familiar to us, remains elusive to our understanding.

It has been the view of some more recent philosophers of language that the problem should be approached indirectly. Rather than attempting to say what meaning is, these philosophers choose to ask: what form should a *theory* of meaning take? This method has been adopted by philosophers of language as different as Davidson and Dummett.³⁰ The latter writes, "Once we can enunciate the general principle in accordance with which such a construction [of a theory of meaning] could be carried out, we shall have arrived at a solution to the problems concerning meaning by which philosophers are perplexed."³¹ Once such a theory has been constructed we can say the following: meaning is what a theory of meaning is a theory of.

This indirect approach to the problem of meaning chosen by the theory builders stands in stark contrast to the more direct method chosen by Grice. In the latter's work there is no mention of general principles or of theories. Rather, Grice sets out in a quite straightforward way to elucidate our concept of meaning in terms of various beliefs and intentions of speakers and hearers.³² Such elucidation is common in philosophy: one takes the concept one is interested in and analyzes it in terms of other concepts whose joint application is both necessary and sufficient for its application.³³