

SOME REMARKS ON GRICE'S VIEWS ABOUT THE LOGICAL PARTICLES OF NATURAL LANGUAGE

In the earlier part of a stimulating series of William James Lectures at Harvard in 1968 Professor H. P. Grice drew the attention of the philosophical public¹ to a most intriguing hypothesis about the familiar logical particles of natural language 'not', 'and', 'if ... then ...', and 'either ... or ...'. I shall henceforth call this the Conversationalist Hypothesis. What it asserts is that those particles do not diverge in meaning, or linguistic function, from the formal-logical symbols, ' \sim ', '&', ' \rightarrow ', and ' \vee ' respectively, as standardly interpreted by two-valued truth-tables, and that wherever they appear to diverge from truth-functionality the appearance is due to the various standing presumptions with which natural language utterances are understood. On the whole Grice argued in favour of this hypothesis, though he confessed to having no answer to one particular objection to it. I shall argue in this paper that the objection to which Grice refers is not, *pace* Grice, a serious one, but that there are good reasons for preferring an alternative account, which I shall call the Semantical Hypothesis, to the Conversationalist Hypothesis. According to the Semantical Hypothesis many occurrences of these particles do differ in significance from their formal-logical counterparts and many do not, and both kinds of occurrence are best explained within the bounds of an adequate semantical theory for natural languages and without recourse to a theory of conversational presumptions.

Grice in fact also included such expressions as 'all', 'some', and 'the' within the scope of the hypothesis that he was supporting. But he offered no arguments about these expressions. So, like him, I shall confine my remarks on the subject to the level of propositional logic. The question

of quantification-theoretic idiom is also an interesting one, but it can be left for another occasion.

No doubt philosophers have sometimes mistakenly attributed to the meaning of a word or the analysis of a concept some feature that is more correctly regarded as a condition for the appropriateness of certain utterances involving that word or concept. Such philosophers have been struck, for example, by the oddity of discussing whether or not an action is voluntary when the action itself is a perfectly satisfactory one; and then they have mistakenly traced this oddity to the meaning of the word 'voluntary' instead of to the conditions for there being some point in remarking of a (voluntary) act that it was voluntary. No doubt there are a number of philosophical errors than can thus be corrected by paying a proper regard to the presumptions of normal conversation. But it is also possible for the pendulum to swing too far in this direction. What is better accounted a feature of linguistic meaning may sometimes be put down to conversational presumptions. This, I shall argue, is what the Conversationalist Hypothesis does in regard to the logical particles of natural language.

One can easily see why the Conversationalist Hypothesis is so tempting. If there are divergences of meaning between 'not', 'and', 'if ... then ...', and 'either ... or ...', on the one hand, and their familiar formal-logical counterparts, on the other, the task of representing the logic of natural language becomes more complicated. If this representation is to be accomplished within a formal theory one or other of two things has to be done.

On one alternative some tailor-made non-truth-functional system has to be constructed with temporal connectives, intensional conditionals, and so on. But at best such a system achieves fidelity of representation in a certain area of language only at the cost of sacrificing conceptual economy and computational facility. More commonly the system throws up its own, more subtle, divergences from natural language.

On the other alternative, the formal theory is offered as a reconstruction, rather than as a description or replication of natural language, and divergences are explained away as being unimportant for logical purposes. For example, if 'if ... then ...' is always reconstructed as the truth-functional ' $\dots \rightarrow \dots$ ', most intuitively valid patterns of deductive inference that involve conditional statements, like modus ponens, can be reproduced, and no inference from true premises to false conclusions will ever be validated. But then the system also throws up inferences that seem to have no counterparts in natural language, like that from ' q ' to ' $p \rightarrow q$ '. To avoid either alternative, and thus escape through the horns of the dilemma, one has to surrender altogether the search for a formal

representation and be content with informal descriptions of ordinary usage. But this is to sacrifice all the rigour of treatment, and opportunities for insight, that formal systematisation can provide. No wonder, then, that the Conversationalist Hypothesis should be so tempting. All these difficulties loom over us as a result of our assuming that 'not', 'and', etc. commonly differ in meaning from their familiar formal-logical counterparts. If that assumption could be safely abandoned, the classical truth-functional systems of Frege and Russell would afford an accurate and economical representation of the fundamental features of the logic of natural language.

Unfortunately, however, tempting though the Conversationalist Hypothesis may be, there are good reasons for rejecting it in favour of the Semantical Hypothesis. I shall discuss each of the four main particles in turn.

1. NOT

According to the usual two-valued truth-table definition of ' \sim ', ' $\sim p$ ' is false whenever ' p ' is true. But there are several dialects or natural languages in which 'not', or its counterparts, do not behave in this way. In several London dialects of English, for example,

(1) You won't get no beer here

is an emphatic reformulation, not a negation, of

(2) You'll get no beer here.

I.e., in these dialects (1) is true, not false, when (2) is true. Similar emphatic uses of the negative particle occur in Italian (e.g., 'Non fa niente'), in Spanish and in Homeric and classical Attic Greek.²

How could the Conversationalist Hypothesis be defended against such *prima facie* counter-examples? One possible move would be to say that the Hypothesis is not to be construed as making a claim about natural language in general but only about some dialects of some natural languages, e.g., Standard English. But not only is this not how Grice apparently envisaged the hypothesis that he was discussing. It also substantially weakens the claim that is made. The claim now is that some natural languages or dialects are fundamentally truth-functional, rather than that all are. Instead of purporting to express a general truth about the logic of natural language, it now does no more than describe an idiosyncrasy of vocabulary that is allegedly present in some languages and absent in others.

Another possible move would be to say that the Conversationalist Hypothesis is to be construed as making a claim not about the negative

particle 'not', and its counterparts in other languages, but rather about the phrase 'it is not the case that' and its equivalents. It may well be that those phrases do conform to the usual truth-table definition of the formal-logical constant ' \sim '. However, this is again not how Grice himself apparently envisaged the hypothesis that he was discussing. And in any case the claim made is substantially weakened. It applies only to certain phrases in which 'not' occurs rather than to that word in general.

So perhaps a third possible defence could be offered, viz., that the apparent equivalence between (1) and (2) is not an equivalence of sentential meaning, but an equivalence in force of utterance, due to the bearing of conversational presumptions on our assertions. Now, Grice held that, *cetera paribus*, participants in a conversation will be expected to observe a general principle that runs roughly as follows: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk-exchange in which you are engaged." Several more specific maxims, on Grice's view, will yield results, more or less in accordance with this general principle, e.g., 'Make your contribution as informative as is required', 'Don't say what you believe to be false', 'Don't say what you lack evidence for', 'Be relevant', 'Avoid obscurity, ambiguity or unnecessary prolixity', and 'Be orderly'. It is conceivable therefore that in every case in which, in some dialect or other, someone utters a double negative as in (1) with the purport of a single negative like (2), the speaker should be construed to be speaking ironically. That is, we have to presume his obedience to the maxim 'Don't say what you believe to be false', and should therefore infer, from the obvious falsehood of what he says if taken literally, that he must be speaking ironically. There is an implicature, as Grice calls it now,³ of irony: i.e., one has to assume irony in order to maintain the supposition that the cooperative principle and maxims are being observed. If this were the case, the negative particle in (1) would have its usual meaning, in accordance with the truth-table definition of ' \sim ', and the equivalence between (1) and (2) would not be an equivalence of sentential meaning, but the kind of equivalence that exists between an ironical utterance of 'He's a fine person to trust' and a non-ironical utterance of 'He's a bad person to trust'.

But the defence of irony will not work here. First, it doesn't fit the facts. It assumes a quite incredibly wide prevalence of ironical speech. Indeed it implies the use of irony on very many occasions on which the hearer has no reason to believe that in its literal meaning what the speaker says is false, and therefore no adequate reason to believe that he is talking ironically. Secondly, the defence of irony will be even less plausible when the emphatic double negative occurs in a subordinate clause,

as in the antecedent of a conditional or in indirect speech. Compare, e.g.,

If I won't get no beer here, I'll have a cider instead

or

They've tried to fix it so you won't get no beer here.

But, if irony is not at work here, it is very difficult indeed to see in what other way conversational presumptions could lead to the equivalence of uttering (1) with uttering (2) when 'not' is purely truth-functional. Indeed it looks as though this equivalence stems from an equivalence of sentential meaning between (1) and (2).

2. AND

Perhaps it will be said that at least Grice's own dialect is one in which 'not' always functions in accordance with the truth-table definition of ' \sim ', and never just adds emphasis to another negative. But what about 'and'? Let us look at some of the data.

Two facts seem incontestable. On the one hand, in some cases the utterance of two sentences conjoined by 'and' asserts more than just the truth of both statements. For example, there is an important difference between what is implied by an assertion, *tout court*, of the sentence

- (3) A republic has been declared and the old king has died of a heart attack

and what is implied by an assertion, *tout court*, of the sentence

- (4) The old king has died of a heart attack and a republic has been declared.

The order of events implied by an assertion of (3) is the converse of that implied by an assertion of (4). On the other hand, in some cases the assertion of two sentences conjoined by 'and' implies no more than the truth of both statements, as in

- (5) The old king has died of a heart attack and a republic has been declared, but I don't know which of these two events preceded the other nor do I wish to suggest some connection tends to exist between two such events.

In these latter cases every bit of additional information that might have been conveyed by the utterance of 'and' is somehow cancelled or deleted. (Compare too the patent truth-functionality of 'It is the case that ... , and it is the case that ...'.)

Knowledge and Language

Selected Essays of L. Jonathan Cohen

Cohen, L.J. - Logue, J. (Ed.)

2002, XXVIII, 324 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0474-2