



Thought and Experience

The Gricean Program

Alex Barber

You will hear an interview with Doctor Barry Smith and Professor Tim Crane. I began by asking Barry Smith, of Burbeck College, London, to outline the central elements of what has come to be known as the Gricean Program.

Dr Barry Smith

Well what philosophers mean by the Gricean Program now is usually the idea that we are trying to explain the meaning of linguistic utterances in terms of the contents of our mental states and rather complicated audience directed intentions and beliefs we have about what people will understand by what we say and what we do. Now Grice himself had a rather larger understanding of the program, his own program. He wanted to explain what people mean on an occasion when they use words to convey something to one another. He wanted a specific account of that occasion meaning in terms of beliefs and intentions of the speaker. But he also then wanted to move from there to explain how words and sentences could come to have meanings that endured from occasion to occasion. He wanted them to have an account of the timeless meaning as it were of words and sentences.

Alex Barber

Can I ask why anybody would want to understand the relationship between psychological content and the meaning of an utterance on an occasion and the meaning of words in this kind of hierarchical way?

Dr Barry Smith

I think it's an intuitive thought that being creatures with minds having mental states in which we think about ourselves and the world and things around us we already have thoughts that are about something. Now when we use words and sentences, when we go in for linguistic communication, we seem to be using these noises, perhaps rather at first artificially to convey something to one another. Eventually of course the noises come to carry the meanings and significances they have for us in a very well understood rather regular way. But Grice wanted to see that linguistic communication using the sounds and noises I am using now, is to be explained in terms of a much wider notion of communication; communication that's natural between thinkers with minds who are also agents acting in the world and acting on one another. So when I want to communicate with you I don't have to use these sounds, these noises. There is a lot of non-linguistic communication like waving my hand or signalling to you by a gesture. And of course animals engage in a great deal of communication, which we wouldn't think was linguistic. The thought is if we can explain the specific linguistic communication in terms of this more general form of directed mental activity and attempt to influence the minds of one another then perhaps language won't seem so special and mysterious.

Alex Barber

The claim that language is just one form of communication resonates with Grice's use of the word "utterance" in I suppose a slightly strange sounding way to mean not merely linguistic utterances, utterances performed using words but any meaningful act. I mean is there a connection there?

Dr Barry Smith

Yes. I mean I think Grice uses this word utterance and by that means a gesture, something we do, an act, as well as what you are hearing now my actually uttering recognisable words and sentences of English. And Grice thinks that instead of trying to figure out what people are up to or intend when they communicate by starting with a linguistic utterance and saying well what does it mean? That must tell me what somebody intends or what they are trying to say. It's rather that the notion of a linguistic utterance is just a specific refinement of this more

general sense of doing something, behaving in a way to convey significance to another being, another minded creature and therefore utterance is going to cover as I say gestures. It's going to cover noises that are not specifically linguistic; various ways in which we can attract one another's attention with the idea of getting something across.

Alex Barber

Let me express the Gricean view in a very sort of flat footed way and raise an objection to that way of putting it and then ask you whether that's a misrepresentation or whether he has got some kind of response. Here is the flat-footed version of what Grice is trying to do. He doesn't think that what our utterances mean comes from the words that we are using, where this is somehow independent of our psychological states. Rather he thinks that what our references mean comes from within so the objection to that view, if it is Grice's view, is that well it seems obvious that what we mean depends on our words not on some kind of hidden interior psychological state - our intentions. Is that a fair representation of Grice and a fair criticism?

Dr Barry Smith

Well this is I think where Grice really has something to say to diffuse that criticism. It's as if Grice is going to reverse the order of explanation. He is going to say of course, of course we recognise what other people are thinking by what they tell us and by using the words they do they tell us a lot about what they think. They tell us about what is going on around them. They convey new information to us about the world. But how did those signs that they use come to get their meaning in the first place? How did these noises have this easy association with what is going on inside someone else's mind and Grice thinks that we can explain philosophically and satisfactorily how that one off occasion comes to have a significance that both speaker and perhaps hearer can pick up a regular repertoire of such utterances laid down among a community of speakers will put in place a regularity of making those utterances convey certain meanings between minds and I think that way Grice hopes to get away from the difficulty of either seeing meaning hiding just in the mind of the speaker, unobserved, or depending on words having meanings where there is no account of how they come to have that significance when it seems to depend on us.

Alex Barber

It is a commitment of his theory, that there be somebody, that there be an audience. So for example if I were to say, "there's a book case behind you" - use those words to say that, in this particular case there is an audience and I am intending to bring about a change in the audience, in fact you. But if Grice's theory is to generalise there must always be an audience but there seem to be a lot of cases of meaningful language use where there is no audience and that would seem to suggest that what gives these utterances their meaning is just the words that are used. So I am thinking of examples like diary writing or speaking to your dog or talking to yourself or a soliloquy.

Dr Barry Smith

OK. Now...

Alex Barber

...plenty of examples.

Dr Barry Smith

...plenty of examples. I think we have to be careful with the cases. With soliloquy, we know soliloquies because of our appreciation of Shakespearean plays where characters come to the front of the stage and seem to talk to themselves but of course a soliloquy is talking to the audience so we mustn't forget that although in the conventions of the play the person is talking to themselves they are really talking to us. Writing a diary - another case. I think a lot of people write diaries secretly because they hope they are going to be read by another and perhaps when they are ultimately famous.

Alex Barber

Have you never talked to yourself?

Dr Barry Smith

Yes. But I think talking to oneself is a good case. I think when you do talk to yourself out loud as it were instead of just thinking you are in effect addressing yourself. You are talking to an audience. You are the listener. So I think it is still an audience directed piece of speech.

Alex Barber

Can I ask you about complex intentions - the complexity of the Gricean intentions? When you actually look at the Gricean theory and all these clauses, three or four clauses, and people have raised objections to his theory, which has led to even more complexity. That seems ludicrous. When somebody goes into a shop and asks for a jar of coffee they don't have these complex Gricean intentions.

Dr Barry Smith

Yes. I mean even to state the Gricean theory it seems to be too complex by uttering a particular expression. Now I have to intend that you have a particular belief and I have to intend that you recognise my intention and that I intend that you use that recognition in order to come to have the belief. Now that seems very high falutin' and rather complex and we wonder whether that is really going on in cases of ordinary speech. Grice doesn't think that it has to be going on in every case of speech because we do fall into these more routinised and regular ways of talking rather conventional ways of speaking. But he does think that they must all be based on and backed up by just such speech acts that we really do try to convey not only the content of what we are saying but the intention that someone recognises what we are up to. And I think it's not wrong to say that when I am talking to you now I want you not just to be aware of what I am saying but I want you to recognise that I am talking to you and intending to address you with these remarks and I want you to appreciate that I am doing that in order to understand the significance of our speech and talk now. When we have to deal with potential counter examples where all the Gricean conditions seem to be met but because of an extra special feature of the case we have to bring in a further intention of the part of the speaker and each counter example leads to a repair, leads to another suggested counter example, postulation of more intentions and then I think it starts to become unnatural and it starts to look as though there is too much going on here. Grice could either talk about people having these intentions unconsciously operating with them in some unconscious sense, but that's controversial. Or he could say that as long as the basic conditions are met and the conditions that would bring about the counter examples don't occur then somebody does succeed in meaning something by uttering a particular expression on an occasion.

Alex Barber

Are there any other considerations that speak against, not the details of the Gricean theory, but the whole project of reducing linguistic meaning or the meaning of utterances and so forth to the content of psychological states?

Dr Barry Smith

I think there is a big objection waiting in the wings here which really might threaten the whole Gricean reductive analyses of linguistic meaning to the beliefs and intentions of the speaker uttering and I think that the danger is just this. If we are going to try and analyse the meaning of a linguistic expression in terms of the content of people's psychological states, their beliefs and intentions, we have to ask ourselves "where do the contents of those states come from?" Now it's quite a common thought that a lot of the contents of our mental states, our beliefs might come from sentences and language and even they might come from the information we acquire from having a language, talking to others, reading books and so on. Now, if the contents of our psychological states themselves depend on language or might even be themselves linguistic then there is no way that we can complete the Gricean story of reducing the meaning of linguistic expressions to the contents of our psychological states and our intentions.

Alex Barber

Why think that the content of our psychological states depends on language?

Dr Barry Smith

Well if we don't depend on language to get the contents of our thoughts, and there are very, very many contents, huge and varied numbers of things that we can think and we have to suppose that somehow we are generating the contents of our thoughts from inside the head with no dependence on our dealings with other people and their transmission of thoughts to us. The question is whether there is a satisfactory psychological story about generating the content of thoughts subtly from within our own head.