Original Paper

The Gap between Speaker's Meaning and Hearer's Meaning in Communication: Within and Beyond Classical Gricean Theory of Meaning

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Abstract

Under the guidance of classical Gricean theory of meaning, it is conventionally accepted that speaker's meaning is contingent upon speaker's intention in communication, whereas hearer's meaning involves the recognition and interpretation of speaker's intention according to other principles of meaning in pragmatics. Consequently, a gap emerges between speaker's intended meaning and the meaning comprehended by the hearer. This paper presents the gap at first and then illustrates three primary factors contributing to it: namely, the unclear boundary between what is said and what is implicated, the indistinct contextual cues, and the different backgrounds of both speaker and hearer. Finally, for the purpose of facilitating effective communication, strategies are proposed to bridge the gap, emphasizing the importance of shared linguistic knowledge and contextual information between speaker and hearer, as well as the hearer's assuming about the speaker's intention. It is hoped that the paper would provide some new aspects for the research of communication.

Keywords

speaker's meaning, hearer's meaning, speaker's intention, to bridge the gap

1. Introduction

In the famous article of "Meaning", British philosopher P. H. Grice initially divided meaning into natural meaning (meaning$_N$) and non-natural meaning (meaning$_{NN}$), and meaning$_{NN}$ became his research focus. When it comes to Gricean account of meaning and communication, meaning$_{NN}$ reflects the now widespread assumption in pragmatics that it arises through the speaker having a specific kind of meaning (or communicative) intention. Therefore, meaning$_{NN}$ is roughly equivalent to speaker

meaning (Note 1) which is pivoting on the notion of intention. Grice developed a reductive analysis of meaning$_{NN}$ or speaker meaning in terms of speaker intention (Note 2):

> Grice's theory of meaning$_{NN}$
>
> S means$_{NN}$ p by "uttering" U to A if and only if S intends:
>
> (i) A to think p,
>
> (ii) A to recognize that S intends (i), and
>
> (iii) A's recognition of S's intending (i) to be the primary reason for A thinking p.

Where S stands for the speaker, A for the audience, U for the utterance, and p for the proposition (Huang, 2014, p. 29).

The essential idea is that a speaker means$_{NN}$ something by intending that the hearer recognizes what is meant as intended by the speaker, that is to say, meaning$_{NN}$ or speaker meaning is a matter of expressing and recognizing intentions. In communication, what is meant is generally that the speaker has a particular belief, thought, desire, attitude, intention and so on, and the hearer tries to recognize speaker intention to achieve communicative success.

There are two approaches to the interpretation of utterance meaning: one is speaker-oriented intentionalist approach, which submits meaning to the speaker's authority; and the other is hearer-oriented anti-intentionalist approach, which submits meaning to the hearer's authority. As for intentionalist approaches to utterance interpretation, the purpose of language is to enable the speaker to communicate her beliefs and desires to the hearer; therefore, intentionalists hold the meaning of an utterance depends fundamentally on what the speaker wants to convey by uttering it (Davidson, 1986; Neale, 1992, 2016; Recanati, 2005; Korta & Perry, 2010; Montminy, 2010; Stokke, 2010; Speaks, 2016, 2017). However, as far as anti-intentionalists are concerned, the speaker intention is private and inaccessible to the hearer, whereas meaning is essentially public. So, anti-intentionalists think the meaning of the speaker's utterance is determined by what is available to the hearer, either by means of shared conventions or of diverse sorts of contextual cues. What an utterance means depends fundamentally on what the hearer is in a position to understand by it (McGinn, 1981; Travis, 1989; Reimer, 1991; Saul, 2002; Gauker, 2008; Mount, 2008; Lepore & Stone, 2015). From what has been discussed, we may notice that there sometimes could be misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the speaker by the hearer, if what the hearer thinks is different from what the speaker intends to mean or the hearer may respond in an unaccepted way as the speaker imagines. For example, if the speaker says "It is too cold" with the intention to ask the hearer to close the window of the room, but the hearer does not understand the intention, and he passes a jacket to the speaker. So in this case it is possible that we doubt the effectiveness of the communication and begin to focus on the gap between speaker's meaning and hearer's meaning.

In this paper, I will try to answer the following three research questions:

1) What is the gap between speaker's meaning and hearer's meaning?

2) What causes the gap between speaker's meaning and hearer's meaning? (Why such gap?)

3) How should interlocutors bridge the gap in order to communicate successfully?

2. Intentional Approach—Speaker's Meaning

The discussions on the notion of speaker meaning have aroused the interest of many researchers among whom Grice must be one of the outstanding. In the introduction part, we have introduced the three conditions which are necessary and jointly sufficient for a speaker to mean something by an utterance, which could be summarized as "A meant$_{NN}$ something by x" is roughly equivalent to "A uttered x with the intention to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention" (Grice, 1989, p. 220). Accordingly, what the speaker means is determined by the intended effect. Besides, on Grice's conception, based on the presence or absence of truth-conditionality, speaker's meaning can be first divided into what is said and what is implicated, for deriving from the linguistic knowledge of the utterance, what is said could be asserted from the truth values. What's more, what is implicated plays a much more important role in Gricean meaning system, which can be further divided into conventional implicature and conversational implicature. Specifically, what is conversationally implicated could be subdivided into Particularized Conversational Implicature (PCI) and Generalized Conversational Implicature (GCI) (see Figure 1 below).
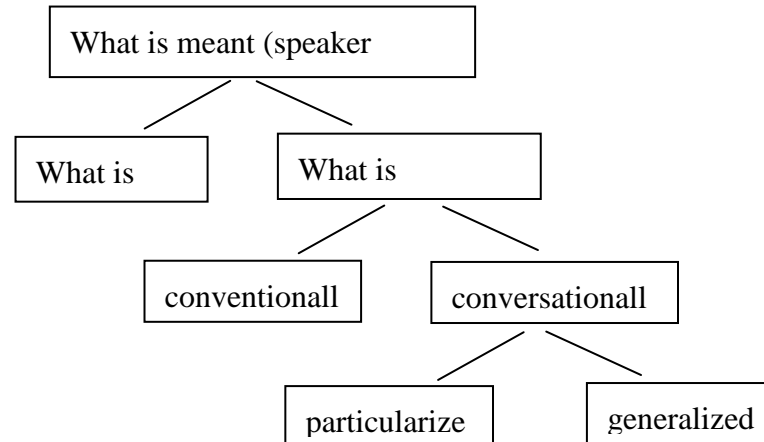
What is meant (speaker

What is   What is

conventionall   conversationall

particularize   generalized

Figure 1. The Taxonomy of Gricean Speaker's Meaning

Figure 1 shows the basis of the seminal Gricean meaning theory, with both what is said and what is implicated serving as the content of the speaker's meaning which involves speaker's intention. What is said is generally equivalent to the literal meaning of an utterance, which is conventional, truth-conditional and intentional. Here we only focus on the intentional property of what is said. In one case, if the speaker intends to say that p but has uttered, for one reason or another, an expression which conventionally means that q, he has not said that q. Rather, he has just made as if to say that q. As in the

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instance of an irony, *p*: George W. Bush is not a very polished public speaker. *q*: George W. Bush is a very polished public speaker. In order to satirize George W. Bush, the speaker has just made as if to say that George W. Bush is a polished public speaker by using a sentence which conventionally means George W. Bush is a polished public speaker with an intention that he is not. In another case, if the speaker intends to say that *p* but has accidentally produced an expression that conventionally means that *q*, he has said neither that *p* nor that *q*. He has only acoustically uttered or physically scripted the expression. For example, *p*: I am having a small conservatory built onto the back of my house. *q*: I am having a small conservative built onto the back of my house. In this example of a slip of the tongue, if the intended word "conservatory" is mispronounced as "conservative", then the utterance makes no sense at all, because the slip of the tongue does not rely on the speaker's intention.

On the other hand, what is conversationally implicated is more inclined to speaker-centrality. Grice once discovered that people in everyday conversation often mean something more or even different from what is linguistically encoded without being misunderstood, and the traditional truth-conditional semantics cannot explain this phenomenon, it consequently being not adequately account for the general nature of human verbal interaction. Therefore, Grice creatively invented the term "implicature/implicatum" to cover all the information which is beyond, or perhaps more important than what is said. Generally speaking, what is implicated is what a speaker communicates without explicitly saying it. For instance, A: Do you want to go to the cinema tonight? B: I will have an exam tomorrow morning. In this case, it is clear that B does not only communicate what he literally says, which is he will have an exam tomorrow morning. He also implicitly communicates that he is not going to the cinema tonight, because he will prepare for the next-day exam. Similarly, in the example that the teacher says "Some students have passed the exam", the speaker does not merely communicate that some students have passed the exam, which is explicitly said, but that not all students have passed, which is implicitly uttered. Such implicitly or indirectly communicated contents are what Grice calls "implicature", and the hearer cannot effectively and accurately infer the implicature without understanding the speaker's intention correctly. Given that the total signification of an utterance is what is intended by the speaker, it is impossible to give an adequate Gricean account of any genus of the total signification of an utterance without reference to speaker's intention (Feng, 2013).

According to the above analysis, as for the version of Gricean meaning theory, conversational implicature belongs to a species of speaker's meaning, and speaker's meaning divides exhaustively into what is said and what is implicated. However, sometimes the boundary between what is said and what is implicated is not so clear that there are many things which speakers mean that they neither say nor implicate. The problem for this understanding of Grice resides in the fact that Grice's characterizations of speaker's meaning and conversational implicature turn out to be very different terms; the former is interpreted completely in terms of speaker's intention while the latter incorporates a good deal about the hearer.

3. Anti-intentional Approach—Hearer's Meaning

It is undoubted that the Gricean theory is generally from the perspective of speaker's meaning; however, current pragmatics research appears to focus on hearer's meaning. In other words, the interpretation of utterances from the perspective of the audience rather than the producer comes into view of pragmatists. This approach is distinct from the previous intentional approach, which is contrastively called anti-intentional approach.

Generally speaking, the hearer-centered analysis of utterance meaning in communication can be explained in two ways: one is relevance theory and the other is the misinterpretation of the Gricean implicature. Although relevance theorists take a somewhat greater interest in the hearer's perspective, what they call ostensive-inferential communication still depends essentially on the speaker "making manifest" both a communicative and an informative intention (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p. 54). However, in reality, sometimes, the hearer is able to interpret the given utterance meaning without the manifest speaker's meaning. On the other hand, what the speaker intends to mean is not interpreted by the hearer under a particular circumstance when it comes to Gricean implicature. For example, in different contexts, the same sentence "You are such a nice person" could be interpreted positively or negatively or even used as a request for some help. If the hearer cannot distinguish the intended meaning particularly, there will be a failure in communication. Saul (2002) made a difference between "utterer-implicatures" that are claims that the speaker attempts to conversationally implicate (intended by the speaker, but not necessarily recognized by the addressee), and "audience-implicatures" that are claims that the audience takes to be conversationally implicated (recognized by the addressee but not necessarily intended by the speaker).

A theory of meaning in communication ought, among other things, to be able to account for the fact that speaker is held socially accountable for their utterances, and to explain on what basis her accountability is implemented. Thereby Hansen and Terkouraf (2023) posited a theoretical hearer-based counterpart to the notion of speaker's meaning. They defined hearer's meaning as consisting of the following three components:

(a) what the hearer (H) (purports to) take(s) the speaker (S) to have said in producing the utterance (U);

(b) what H (purports to) take(s) S to have presupposed and/or implicated by producing U;

(c) any further socially accountable inferences H (purports to) believe(s) follow from (a)-(b), including, but not limited to, the type of social action that H takes U to count as.

The hearer setting out to find out what the speaker wanted to say may arrive at the speaker's intended meaning, or, in less felicitous cases, at a different meaning or no meaning at all. In some cases, the hearer acts upon a meaning which she takes to be no more than a possible meaning of the speaker's utterance; while in other cases, the meaning of an utterance is taken by the hearer only because she thinks the utterance responsibility depends on the producer rather than the addressee. Usually, with the purpose of coming up with a hypothesis about the speaker's intention, the hearer uses as evidence the

linguistic meaning of the utterance and all types of contextual cues, such as gestures, mimics, previous discourse, background knowledge, diverse features of the communicative situation. Sometimes, in our daily communication, if the hearer infers a different meaning from the speaker's intended meaning or if the hearer does not infer any meaning at all, it is natural for the hearer to ask the speaker for her intention. Therefore, by the speaker's further discourse in one way or other, the hearer is informed about the speaker's intention and tries to adjust her understanding accordingly. In all these cases, the hearer seemingly tends for the speaker's intended meaning in so far as she goes along with the speaker's intended meaning as the meaning in force. In other words, in order to guarantee the successful communication, the hear will try to follow up the speaker's meaning according to specific contexts, and if in doubt she will also adjust her interpretation of the utterance by asking the speaker for her real intention, after all, the hearer is willing to cooperate with the speaker in most cases.

4. Causes for the Gap between Speaker's Meaning and Hearer's Meaning

As is known to all, it is not hardly to see the gap between speaker's meaning and hearer's meaning even though the speaker and hearer, using the same language, are from the same cultural background. Based on the previous analysis discussed, the speaker's meaning, no matter what is said and what is implicated, is closely related to speaker's intention, and the hearer's meaning involves not only her recognition of the speaker's intention but also the contexts as well as the negotiation between the hearer and the speaker; thus the gap between speaker's meaning and hearer's meaning mainly represents itself in the difference between the speaker's intended meaning and the hearer's perceived meaning. In this paper, I argue the causes for such gap will generally fall into three categories:

First, Gricean speaker's meaning does not allow the actual state of mind of the audience to impose any restrictions at all on what the speaker may really mean. But it is quite natural that the hearer, as human being, is endowed with her own ideas and mental sates in different situations. Since we have noticed that the hearer's state of mind can impose constraints on what is conversationally implicated, speaker's meaning cannot be divided clearly into what is implicated and what is said. Therefore, there is still room for a speaker to mean something which is not conventionally meant by her utterance, and which does not come to be conversationally implicated. For instance, the young people like to use Internet slang terms in daily communication like "I can't even", but the old people may not understand the conventional meaning of the expression not even its conversational implicature in playing computer games. How can the aged one communicate successfully with the younger one in this case? If what the speaker utters is without clear boundary between what is said and what is implicated, then the hearer's recognition of the speaker's intention will be influenced; there comes along the gap between speaker's meaning and hearer's meaning.

What's more, the reason why the hearer may not get at the speaker's intention is that linguistic and contextual cues may indicate a meaning different from the speaker's intended meaning. The speaker's

intention is, as it were, unrestricted by the linguistic and contextual material of her utterance. Take an ambiguous sentence as an example. If the speaker says "Please recognize it by its unusual bark" without no specific context, the hearer does not know whether the speaker asks her to recognize a tree by a look of the bark on its trunk, or whether the speaker asks her to recognize a dog by the sound of its barking. In many cases, the typical polysemous word "bark" would be disambiguated by the surrounding context, but in the absence of contextual information, the sentence is ambiguous. Thereby the ambiguous utterance could also bring about the gap between speaker's meaning and hearer's meaning without particular contexts.

Furthermore, Kecskes (2010) argued that the proposition the speaker produces will hardly be the same as that which will be recovered by the hearer because interlocutors are individuals with different cognitive predispositions, prior experiences, and different histories of use of the same words and expressions. For example, when it comes to cross-cultural communication, both the speaker and the hearer must have their prior knowledge of some words, expressions even cultural events. Chinese take "dragon" as the symbol of glory, while western people regard "dragon" as devil and monster, so when Chinese and western people are interlocutors who are talking about "dragon", if they do not respectively understand the culture from the other side, probably the gap will occur between speaker's meaning and hearer's meaning.

Additionally, in other cases, the speaker and the hearer will deliberately flout the Cooperative Principle and its maxims proposed by Grice; the speaker will persuade the hearer to misunderstand her intended meaning, like the oral defence at court; the ambiguous context of utterance will also cause the meaning gap between the speaker and the hearer. Based on what has been discussed, the causes of such gap are not only from the participants of the communication, the speaker and the hearer, but also from the outside aspect such as the context. How to bridge the gap to ensure the communicative success for both the speaker and the hearer?

5. The Strategies to Bridge the Gap

Since it is discussed that there exists the gap between speaker's meaning and hearer's meaning, interlocutors are expected to ensure a successful communication by bridging the gap. Presumably, we take the speaker and the hearer as being rational for granted, and they are willing to cooperate with each other in daily communication. In other words, the speaker expresses her intention appropriately while the hearer tries to recognize that intention for the purpose of communicating successfully. Therefore, the crucial assumption about communication is a rational and cooperative practice. This assumption is manifested in Grice's Cooperative Principle: 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 (Grice, 1975). At the meantime, Grice further specifies what communicative cooperation involves by distinguishing four attendant maxims: quantity, quality, relation, and manner.

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The speaker may violate, flout, infringe or opt out the maxim to produce conversational implicatures. There are, of course, all sorts of other maxims (aesthetic, social, or moral in character), such as 'be polite', that are also normally observed by participants in talk exchanges, and these may also generate non-conventional implicatures (ibid.). Based on Cooperative Principle and both speaker's and hearer's being rational, three strategies to bridge the gap between speaker's meaning and hearer's meaning will be as follows:

5.1 Speaker's and Hearer's Shared Linguistic Knowledge

Sometimes, the reason why the hearer fails to recognize the speaker's intention comes from the hearer's lack of linguistic knowledge, especially in the cross-cultural communication. It is intuitively evident that participants in an interaction may disagree about what words and phrases conventionally mean. For instance, a speaker of American English may describe someone as "wearing suspenders and a belt" in order to suggest extreme risk aversion on the part of that person, while in the mind of British hearers, there must be a different image. Even within a single language community, different language users may have sharply different ideas about the nature of the basic descriptive content of certain linguistic items, diverging not only along ethnic or racial lines, but also along ideological ones. What's more, as pointed out by Ariel (2001), inferred content that most researchers from pragmatics would characterize as only weakly conversationally implicated has, in specific instances, been taken by hearers as part of 'what was said' in the truth-conditional sense, and this has notably had real-world consequences for the speakers on those occasions.

Non-descriptive aspects of meaning are possibly even more inclined to be interpreted differently by different hearers, as theorized in Silverstein's (2003) work on orders of indexicality. According to Silverstein, discourse is ideologically saturated, endowing many linguistic behaviors with nth-order indexical significance that goes beyond what those behaviors appear to denote at a purely descriptive level. Such nth-order indexical significance can extend to the attribution, by certain hearers, of very specific meanings to mere sound patterns: thus, in the United States, officials and academics have on occasion found themselves formally sanctioned for using words that phonetically resemble a well-known but semantically and etymologically unrelated racial slur, even where the context did not evidently invite a racially charged interpretation and/or the word spoken was not in fact a word of English.

Therefore, without shared linguistic knowledge the hearer will not correctly understand the speaker's meaning, and without sufficient pragmatic knowledge, the hearer will misinterpret the speaker's intention.

5.2 Appropriate Contextual Information

It is undoubtedly that contextual cues are necessarily essential pragmatic elements in communication. As is mentioned above, the hearer cannot infer the intended meaning of the speaker without appropriate contextual information, such as the speaker's identity, the relationship between the speaker and the

hearer, the time and place of utterance, even the shared background knowledge, the gestures, the facial expressions and voice tone of the speaker etc.

Clark (1997) has pointed out that hearers' assumptions about a speaker's identity may determine their interpretation of what that speaker "says". Clark notes, for instance, that different meanings are likely to be attributed to an adjective like "significant" depending on whether the speaker is known to be a trained statistician or not. The different interpretations that a hearer who is familiar with more than one major variety of English may attribute to the noun "suspenders", depending on whether they believe the speaker is British or American, is another case in point. At the level of what is "meant", Gibbs et al. (1991) showed experimentally that subjects tend to interpret identically phrased metaphorical comparisons as more meaningful when told they were produced by famous poets, than when told they were randomly generated by a computer. Meanwhile, hearers may derive different interpretations of the same utterance(s) depending on the group of relevant identities that they attribute to the speaker.

A hearer's perception of the social relationship (or lack of it) between herself and the speaker is, to a greater or lesser degree, likely to influence the hearer's interpretation. Hansen and Terkouraf (2023) distinguished three different aspects of this relationship which may be of relevance: (a) The existence of any power differential between speaker and hearer; (b) The extent to which the hearer expects to interact with the speaker again in the future; (c) How well the hearer knows and, not least, likes the speaker. With respect to (a) and (b), the less power the speaker has over the hearer, the more the latter will be in a position to choose interpretations independently of the speaker. Indeed, Kukla (2014) argued that, by their choice of uptake, hearers belonging to a more powerful social group can effectively transform a disadvantaged speaker's intended speech act into an act of a different nature. For example, male employees—particularly in traditionally male-dominated fields—can systematically dominate a female manager by choosing to hear her intended orders as mere requests.

5.3 Hearer's Assumptions about Speaker's Intention

The speaker provides the adequate means for the hearer to recover or at least get sufficiently close to her intention, so that the hearer quite immediately arrives at the intended meaning. We should not regard the achievement of the actual meaning of the speaker's utterance as coincidence of both the speaker's intention and the hearer's interpretation, but treat the convergence between the speaker's intention and the hearer's interpretation as a guarantee for the successful communication.

However, it happens though the hearer does not immediately arrive at the speaker's intended meaning. For instance, the linguistic and contextual information of the utterance may be unclear with respect to the speaker's intention, the intended meaning being merely a possible meaning of the utterance. In order to interact with the speaker in the future, it is then natural for the hearer to ask for the speaker's intention and go along with it. Many scholars take the speaker's intention as determining the meaning of her utterance in those cases where the speaker's intention falls within the sphere of permissible meaning. Take an ambiguous utterance as an example, the speaker is thought both to take an interest in

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the speaker's intention and to take the intention to settle the meaning of the utterance.

As we come to the hearer's assumptions regarding the speaker's communicative intention, it is found that the assumptions are crucial for hearers when forming a representation of the meaning of an utterance. The social relation between the speaker and the hearer and the type of linguistic expressions used will decide the extent to which the hearers are prepared to consider what the speaker's intentions may have been. As far as social relations between speaker and hearer are concerned, we argued that all else being equal, hearers who are positively inclined towards a speaker will be more inclined to consider the speaker's probable or stated intention when interpreting a potentially problematic utterance. The greater the overlap between the speaker's communicative intentions and the hearer's interpretation, the more likely it is that both parties will perceive their communicative exchange as success.

6. Conclusion

The discussion on speaker's meaning and hearer's meaning has been for a long period of time, while classical Gricean theory of meaning focuses on speaker's meaning, especially the conversational implicature, hearer's meaning being neglected. On the basis of the analysis of both speaker's meaning and hearer's meaning, it is found that the gap between them is roughly equivalent to the difference between speaker's intended meaning and hearer's perceived meaning. What's more, we argue that the meaning gap comes out from the unclear boundary between what is said and what is implicated, the different linguistic and contextual cues as well as the distinct backgrounds of both the speaker and the hearer. On the premise of people's being rational and Grice's Cooperative Principle and maxims, it is suggested to bridge the gap for the speaker and the hearer to share the common linguistic knowledge and appropriate contextual information, and most importantly, the hearer is supposed to assume the speaker's intention. The line of the study is warranted in that it can provide new perspectives for the research of communication.

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Notes

Note 1. In pragmatics, speaker meaning is the substitute for speaker's meaning.

Note 2. In pragmatics, speaker intention is the substitute for speaker's intention.