

ON WHAT IS SAID

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ABSTRACT

Grice's theory of conversation has enjoyed tremendous success in both philosophy and linguistics since its debut in the sixties. Being one of the aces up Grice's sleeve, what is said has not been treated as it deserves. I therefore intend to capture what Grice had in mind when he coined and refined this notion by integrating evidence in the related articles, and then justify it with Grice's philosophizing and my novel interpretations. The detailed analysis once again proves that Grice was substantially consistent over these years in featuring what is said as the truth-conditional, conventional as well as intention-based content of utterance. Seemingly problematic as what is said is, the notion embodies the heretic spirit of Grice and might not be modified without causing more problems. Moreover, Grice's dichotomy between what is said and what is implicated cannot and is also not designed to solve the semantics-pragmatics conundrum.

KEYWORDS: Grice, what is said, Grice's philosophizing, semantics-pragmatics conundrum

1. INTRODUCTION

Speakers typically communicate more than what is linguistically encoded in talk exchanges. Paul Grice, one of the most influential figures in philosophy and pragmatics, philosophized on this linguistic phenomenon and first systematized it into a theory of conversation. This theory remains a big hit since its formulation and secures Grice an irreplaceable place in the history of philosophy.

There are two eminent notions in this theory, namely, *what is said* and *what is implicated* (Grice 1989). Born at the same time, the two siblings are treated very differently. On one hand, being acknowledged as what Grice is most famous for, what is implicated/implicature is well-received and has always been in the spotlight of pragmatics with the Cooperative Principle accounting for its engenderment, leaving what is said a supporting role somewhat neglectable. However, the two notion being in a dichotomy, we cannot master one without fully understand the other. On the other hand, what is said has been constantly fired at in the heated dispute about the division of labour between semantics and pragmatics. Many scholars, especially post-Gricean minimalists and contextualists, appeal to its modification or even abandonment. To take a stand in this battle, one has to figure out what Grice's notion of what is said really is. And the most direct and efficient way is to trace back to the original Gricean formula.

The major task for this study is to give what is said full play. To be specific, it makes attempt to unveil a more authentic and comprehensive version of what is said by reviewing all the available articles written by Grice. Then I would bring my idea into the discussion of what is said, trying to explain Grice's notion with the help of Grice's philosophy of language.

The study is well worth the effort considering what is said is a must-visit in the tour of implicit, explicit meaning, semantics/pragmatics interface and the like.

2. GRICE'S NOTION OF WHAT IS SAID

Many of us got to know Grice's notion of what is said from, or probably solely from the best-known article "Logic and Conversation" (1975). Actually, this notion can be pinned in several of Grice's publications, and Grice kept refining it over the years. Here I endeavor to identify and analyze Grice's attempts in polishing his ideas.

2.1 The first attempt

The proposal in "The Causal Theory of Perception" (1961) might be the very first silhouette of the theory of implicature (implication back then), at least in all of Grice's published works available. This debut, however, did not weigh much and was very much neglected by researchers. The primary reason might be that Grice himself viewed it as a theory far from systematic and omitted it in his posthumous collection *Studies in the Way of Words* (1989) since "the material which it presents is *substantially* the same as that discussed in Essay 2, under the title 'Logic and Conversation'" (Grice 1989: 229; my emphasis). Referring to the original copy is rewarding, for I did track down some tiny but thought-provoking modifications, which, I believe, is something that no spotlight was shed on so far.

Since the terms of what is said and what is implicated were not coined back then, Grice jumped from one expression to another similar one. It is worth-noticing that for every mentioning of "what the speaker said" in this article, it is followed by the tail—"(or asserted)", whereas when "what is asserted", "what I have asserted" and "assertion" are used, seldom are they followed by "said" or "saying". This discovery implies that originally, Grice equaled what the speaker says with something that he asserts, or, to some degree, assertion fits Grice's blueprint more.

Assertion is one of the areas on which contemporary philosophers of language frequently tread. Given a knowledge of the English language, one knows that to assert something means to state firmly that something is true. In talk exchanges, asserting something entails saying something, but not the other way around. We might also take a quick look at one of the most penetrating mark made by Frege in the clarification of thinking, judgment, and assertion. In his claim, judgement is "acceptance of a proposition as true" and assertion "verbal manifestation of judgement" (Frege 1956). That is to say, the act called assertion is the overt expression of judgment. A large number of philosophers have followed Frege's lead (Kemp 2018; Szabó & Thomason 2018). Also there is Ramsey's account that to assert that a proposition is true is to assert that proposition—is correct so far as it goes (Grice 1989:55).

A glimpse of Grice's understanding of assertion can be caught when he commented on Searle's condition of assertibility. He wrote:

[I]n the ordinary sense of the word, assertion is quite a specific speech-act. To assert is (approximately) to make a claim...fairly clearly there are conditions the fulfillment of which is required if saying something is to count as making an assertion. (Grice 1989:18)

That, to some degree, proves Grice's well-awareness of the difference between saying and asserting. Therefore, his preference for "assert/assertion" must mean something.

For one thing, it hints that the original version of Grice's saying/what is said is designed to be propositional and truth-conditional, and that is also proved with Grice's writing, where he bluntly discussed the truth relation between what is asserted and what is implied:

It is plain that there is no case at all for regarding the truth of what is implied here as a pre-condition of the truth or falsity of what I have asserted; a denial of the truth of what is implied would have no bearing at all on whether what I have asserted is true or false. (Grice 1989:129-130)

For another, the word choice of "assert/assertion" embodies speaker's commitment. According to the speech act theory, when performing the speech act of assertion, the speaker is responsible for the fit between the world and the words. Grice generally agreed with this, but he argued that the felicity conditions is speaker-relative, and could be "best explained by reference to certain general principles of discourse or rational behavior" (Grice 1989: 20).

2.2 The second attempt

The 2nd attempt centers on "Logic and Conversation" (1975) and "Further Notes on Logic and Conversation" (1978). The two articles embody the core of Grice's William James Lectures and offer a more extended and ambitious formula of what is said.

At the first glance, Grice renamed the two notions in his theory. One of the obvious changes is from "imply" and "implication" to "implicate" and "implicature", which was explained by Grice with "'implicature' being a blanket word to avoid having to make choices between words like 'imply', 'suggest', 'indicate', and 'mean'" (Grice 1989: 86). However, the other change equally obvious went unnoticed. When it comes to the notion what is said, not only does the cute little tail "(or asserted)" in the previous proposal magically disappear. Rather, the word "assert/assertion" occurs much less frequently in the related writings. The notion of *what is said* is occasionally explained with another expression—"in a/my favored sense". Notice that Grice made no account for any of these changes in his publications. Therefore, I will have a try at analyzing it, with which I wrap up this section.

Now let us move to the highly-cited definition provided:

In the sense in which I am using the word *say*, I intend what someone has said to be closely related to the conventional meaning of the words (the sentence) he has uttered. (Grice 1989: 25)

Grice was rather cautious when characterizing what is said as being “closely related to the conventional meaning of words”. So how does it mean by *closely related*? He further explained it with the example of “He is in a grip of a vice”, which is so influential that I would spare my time quoting it once again. As is illustrated, a full determination of what is said calls for reference assignment (for “he”), fixing of the time of utterance (for “is”) and disambiguation (for “in the grip of a vice”). In this case, what is said is not solely about linguistic decoding, and that’s why it is *in the favored sense*. Judging from that, Carston views the notion as “a mix of encoded constraints (for demonstratives)” and “contextually-provided content (for pure indexicals)” and it is “subpropositional” (Carston 2009: 44).

Is what the speaker says still propositional or, say, truth-conditional? That is also what baffles me, since it is hard to find any passage in Grice’s paper collection where he explicitly characterized what is said as the truth-conditional content. However, some clues present themselves in Grice’s discussions of the distinction between what is said and *what is conventionally implicated*. When discussing the example “He is an Englishman; he is, therefore, brave”, he remarked:

I do not want to say that my utterance of this sentence would be, *strictly speaking*, false should the consequence in question fail to hold. So *some* implicatures are conventional ... (Grice 1989:25-26; his emphasis)

Grice claimed that the conventional implicature evoked by the linguistic trigger “however” cannot falsify the utterances of sentences, obviously drawing a boundary between implicit meaning and the truth-conditional content. Since what is said is what is involved in this discussion, the *implicature* here is, as many scholars agree, that what is said is the truth-conditional content on the other side of the boundary.

The above detailed analysis makes self-evident that this 2nd shot exerts great influence in defining what is said. The new notion “what is said” gets more flexible than the one in the 1st shot. On one hand, it embraces more possibilities. In light of the deprivation of “assertion”, what is said is no longer sketched as born to be true. Instead, it ought to be something that the speaker *believes to be true* if he is a rational agent obeying Cooperative Principle. And when failing to do so (flouting the first submaxim of Quality in Gricean sense), for example in the cases of irony and metaphor, the speaker *makes as if to say* (Grice 1989:30) without committing himself to the truth of the utterances. The notion adjustment makes sense of these cases just right. On the other hand, Grice brought some context-sensitive elements to the table, altering people’s opinion that the linguistic decoding and the semantic principle of compositionality rule all in the identification of what the speaker says. However, it should be noticed that Grice just put forward certain X-factors, but did not explain how can what is said remain truth-conditional in this case. Also, he seemed to make a detour when discussing the truth-conditionality of what is said and

no explicit characterization can be found. Should what is said be counted as semantic, pragmatic or semantic-pragmatic-hybrid? This is the question that flares up the semantics-pragmatics debate.

2.3 The third Attempt

Grice admitted that a favored notion of “saying” requires further elucidation. So, in “Utterer’s Meaning and Intentions” reprinted in *Studies in the Way of Words* (1989), he “sketched a direction” for “*U*[Utterer] said that *p*” (1989: 87-88) through a series of reasoning, one of his claims being:

U did something *x* (1) by which *U* meant that *p*

(2) which is an occurrence of an utterance type *S* (sentence) such that

(3) *S* means ‘*p*’

(4) *S* consists of a sequence of elements (such as words) ordered in a way licensed by a system of rules (syntactical rules)

(5) *S* means ‘*p*’ in virtue of the particular meanings of the elements of *S*, their order, and their syntactical character.

In this tryout, Grice equipped what is said with both speaker meaning and semantic meaning. By officially introducing the role of *U*[Utterer] into what is said with Condition (1), Grice made particularly evident that what is said was an utterance or speech act related to language use. It also linked the two major strands of Grice’s philosophy, the theory of conversation and the theory of meaning¹, together. See Figure 1:

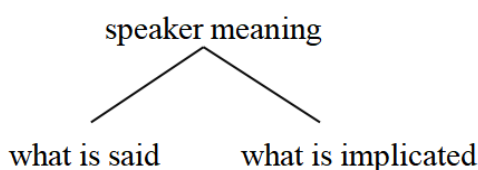


Figure 1 Grice’s signification of an utterance

Therefore, what is said is the dynamic and intended (M-intended) content conveying speaker intentions intended to be recognized by the audiences², rather than the stable semantic or linguistically encoded content.

Condition (2) to (5), on the other hand, make clear that what is said still corresponds to the semantic content of the sentence, following the principle of compositionality and restricted by syntactical rules. It conforms to the truth-conditional semantics. If explained with the Gricean framework of non-natural meaning, what is said belongs to *utterer’s occasion-meaning of an utterance-type* (Grice 1989:90).

Another inspiring formulation would be the final but abbreviated version:

U did something x (1) by which U centrally meant that p

(2) which is an occurrence of a type S part of the meaning of which is ' p '

What is said finally is refined as what the speaker "centrally meant". This slight modification is made for the purpose of allowing for the presence of conventional implicatures. But how to understand "centrally meant"? We might bear this question in mind until Grice's explanation of "centrality" in the coming section.

2.4 The fourth attempt

Strand Five of Grice's "Retrospective Epilogue" (1987) might be the last piece in this jigsaw puzzle, which is also the most difficult one for me to solve.

Grice brought in the notion "centrality" to differentiate between primary ranges of signification and the non-primary ones. He then sketched two criteria for centrality, "formality" and "dictiveness" respectively. As is remarked, the presence or absence of formality depends on whether or not the relevant signification is part of the conventional meaning of the signifying expression, and the presence or absence of dictive content, or dictiveness on whether or not the relevant signification is part of what the signifying expression says. That leads to four different combinations: i) formality with dictiveness; ii) formality without dictiveness; iii) dictiveness without formality; iv) nondictiveness with informality (Grice 1989:359-362).

Grice made a separation between formality and dictiveness. Formality is conventionality, as is clearly indicated by the quotation. How about dictiveness? Is it just another name of what is said? Grice indirectly explained:

[O]ne would be inclined to say that a condition conventionally signified by the presence of the phrase "on the other hand" was in fact not realized ... But the nonrealization of this condition would also be regarded as insufficient to falsify the speaker's statement. So we seem to have a case of a condition which is part of what the words conventionally mean without being part of what the words say; that is, we have formality without dictiveness." (Grice 1989: 361)

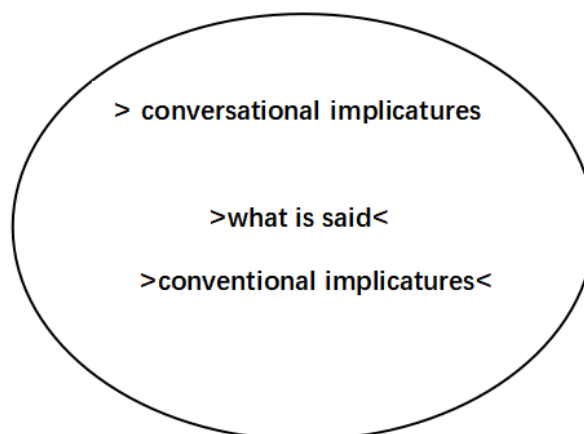
Judging from this quotation, the reason why the phrase "on the other hand" presented in the utterance is disqualified as "being part of what the words say" is that it cannot falsify the utterance. Therefore, dictiveness equates with truth-conditionality in Grice's picture.

These two criteria functions to categorize the total signification of an utterance (Baptista 2004). See Figure 2:

	dictiveness	nondictiveness
formality	i) formality with dictiveness <i>what is said</i>	ii) formality without dictiveness <i>what is conventionally implicated</i>
informality	iii) dictiveness without formality <i>?</i>	iv) nondictiveness with informality <i>what is conversationally implicated</i>

Figure 2 Categories of Grice's signification of utterance

A more rewarding job would be to rank the signification. In light of the centrality test, what is said is guaranteed the absolutely central place for it possesses both dictiveness and formality. That echoes with Grice's writing of what is said being what the speaker "centrally meant" in the last section. On the other hand, what is conversationally implicated, showing neither dictiveness nor formality, is counted as a peripheral case of signification, which would definitely disappoint the fans of conversational implicatures. Being formal without dictive, what is conventionally implicated is somewhere in the middle, holding a rather conspicuous place. That explains the importance constantly attached by Grice to the clarification of the relation of what is said and conventional implicatures. Graph 1 reviews the relation more vividly:



Graph1: Centrality of Grice's signification of utterance

But something is still in the air—dictiveness without formality. Grice seems to suggest that truth-conditional content doesn't have to be conventional. Would it be the place for the context-sensitive or even other pragmatically-enriched elements? Or does it keep open the possibility of private language? That is not clear as far as I know. I honestly believe that we can do further research on that.

In a nutshell, "Retrospective Epilogue" (1987) deserves more attention.

3. DISCUSSION OF WHAT IS SAID SITUATED IN GRICE'S PHILOSOPHIZING

The proposal of the Gricean notion what is said does give rise to a number of doubts. But from where I stand, many of them can be explained with the above analysis and Grice's overall theory of philosophy.

The first point in dispute is whether what is said semantically-determined or pragmatically-determined. In Grice's vision, this notion is both truth-conditional and intentional, making it problematic and somehow caught in the middle of the semantic-pragmatic distinction. But if Grice's philosophical pursuits are taken into consideration, we can see that what is said is just fine as it is.

In the pursuit of meaning, ideal language philosophers value truth, while ordinary language philosophers advocate use. As a "skilful heretic"³, Grice seems to embrace both. As an embodiment of Grice's philosophizing, what is said is a heretic as well. Post-Gricean minimalists and contextualists tend to modify the notion and pull it towards their own camps, but hardly can they succeed without going against the philosopher's will, since semantic minimalists bear no speaker-meaning, while contextualists seriously doubt the truth-conditionality of what is said. In Grice's sketch, the concept of what is said lies right in the interface between Grice's theory of conversation and his theory of meaning. Once the property of being speaker-meant/intentional is wiped off, the whole building of his theory of meaning shakes. When they get rid of the property of being truth-conditional, the theory of conversation would also be in danger.

Another point taken issue on is Grice's over-simplification of the semantics-pragmatics division (Sperber & Wilson 1995; Carston 2002; Perry 1986; Bach 1994; Recanati 2001). The distinction between what is said and what is implicated tends to be viewed as the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. But again, that's simply not what Grice had in mind. The immediate goal of his theory of conversation is to disclaim the common assumption that divergences exist between truth-conditional constants in formal logic and their counterparts in ordinary language. In the aforementioned articles, Grice devoted himself to justifying the non-truth-conditional contribution of the conventional implicatures triggered by logical constants in the truth-conditional contents, rather than justifying the truth-conditionality of what is said. Not to mention the truth-conditionality of what is said is not something Grice defines, but something we infer. And it is also speaker-meant. Therefore, there is no tidy mapping of what is said into semantics and the division of labour between semantics and pragmatics is too messy to be simply grasped with two notions. Recent work in pragmatics has shown that the gap between what is said and what is implicated is wider than was previously acknowledged. But is it really Grice's aim to exhaust speaker meaning? Is there anything in between? Presupposition is already a case in point (Grice 1989: 271-272). It is hard to judge if there are other exceptions.

The third critic concerns how what is said remains propositional with contextual parameters involved. Grice does not explain it, but maybe he doesn't have to. For one thing, those context-sensitive elements are proposed to assess the conventionality of what is said, not the truth-conditionality. Just as Grice himself put it, "conventionality and truth-conditionality are *logically independent* of one another" (Grice 1989:361, my emphasis). Chances are that signification would have truth-conditionality without

conventionality or vice versa. So it makes sense that he mentions indexicals and polysemy to evaluate conventionality without touching upon another criterion truth-conditionality. For other, considering Grice does not abandon ordinary language philosophy and traditional truth-conditional semantics, he might neither see the great linguistic potential behind those context-sensitive elements nor be aware of the pragmatic intrusion they trigger.

To bring my discussion an end, I would like to highlight the fact that Grice is not a linguist who heads to settling the linguistic conundrum, but a philosopher who fights against the excesses of A-philosophers. It would be misfire to evaluate that “Grice seems to be attempting to provide a framework into which every aspect of the interpretation of an utterance can be fitted” (Wilson & Sperber 1981: 156). Some doubts steer people to challenge the Gricean what is said, but they can hardly disapprove it, since we cannot judge it without taking Grice’s philosophizing into consideration.

4. CONCLUSION

Let me take stock. I have gone through the related articles for the purpose of probing into the most authentic and elaborated notion of what is said, and drawn the following conclusions: Firstly, Grice’s ideas are substantially consistent over these years. From the very beginning, he vaguely sketched what is said (or asserted) as something propositional. In the second attempt, he featured the notion as being overall conventional, emphasizing on the role of reference assignment, fixing of the time of utterance and disambiguation in the full identification of what the speaker says. Moreover, he once again hinted at the truth-conditionality of what is said. But he doesn’t account for whether or not these context-sensitive elements encroach upon the truth-conditional content, which gives rise to the semantics-pragmatics debate. In the third attempt, he equipped what is said with both speaker meaning and semantic meaning. Being both intention-based (pragmatically-determined) and truth-conditional (semantically-determined) puts what is said right at gunpoint. In the final attempt, Grice labelled centrality to rank different signification. According to his standard, what is said is given the central position for possessing both dictiveness (truth-conditionality) and formality (conventionality). Secondly, what is said might be problematic from the pragmatic view, but it holds water when viewed from Grice’s overall theory of philosophy. There is no tidy division of labour between semantics and pragmatics. Although Grice’s dichotomy between what is said and what is implicated tend to crisscross the semantics-pragmatics interface, that is not and is not designed to be the solution of this conundrum.

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NOTES

¹ I tend to regard the theory of meaning and the theory of conversation (conversational implicature) as two strands in Grice’s philosophy of language mainly because they are formulated to solve different problems. It is also because of the influences of Chapman (2005) and Szabó and Thomason (2018).

² What the speaker meant/speaker meaning (or meaning_{NN}) in the Gricean sense (1957) is intention-based. “U meant_{NN} something by x” is (roughly) equivalent to “For some audience A, U intended his utterance of x to produce in A some effect, by means of A’s recognition of that intention” (Grice 1989:220).

³ This is how Chapman addresses him in *Paul Grice, Philosopher and Linguist* (2005), in light of the fact that some of his claims deviate from ordinary language philosophy, and he seemed not to sit on either side of empiricist and rationalist, or behaviourist and mentalist.

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