

# What's wrong with Gricean pragmatics

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## Abstract

The view that human communication is essentially a matter of sharing mental states, especially communicative intentions, has been immensely influential in pragmatics and beyond. Drawing together and elaborating various lines of criticism, I argue that this influence has been mostly harmful; in particular, it has misdirected research on the evolution and development of language and communication.

Key words: Gricean pragmatics, mentalism, communicative intentions

## Introduction

It is widely held that communication is a form of information exchange. Pragmatic theories usually embrace a very specific version of this doctrine. To begin with, “information” is restricted to “what’s in the speaker’s mind”; in this sense, the field of pragmatics is predominantly *mentalist*. Moreover, it is broadly accepted that, of all the kinds of things that may be in the speaker’s mind, one is the payload of linguistic communication, namely, communicative intentions; in this sense, pragmatic theories are mostly *Gricean*, for the notion of communicative intention (not the name) goes back to Grice’s (1957) theory of speaker meaning. Another label for this view is “intentionalist”, which I will use interchangeably with “Gricean”.

Since 1957, there has developed a cottage industry of revising and rerevising Grice’s original account, but fortunately we need not concern ourselves with that. Here it will suffice to say that a communicative intention is meant to be recognised as such by the hearer, and is aimed at causing some change in the hearer, typically a change in his belief set. For example, if Alice tells Bruce, “The goose is done”, intending him to come to believe, due to his recognising her intention, that the goose is done, then Alice communicatively intends Bruce to believe that the goose is done.

The intentionalist mantra is that communication is a matter of expressing communicative intentions, on the part of the speaker, and recognising such intentions for what they are, on the hearer’s part. This view is widespread and has been shaping debates and research programmes not only in linguistics and philosophy, but also in the study of language development and language evolution. If there is a dominant view on human communication, this is it.

The following quote illustrates the popularity of intentionalism (as well as the hubris that popularity is liable to breed):

The whole of modern pragmatics is predicated on this assumption [that intentionalism is right], and its findings are arguments in favour of it. Of course, this does not make the assumption right, but those who deny it, are, in effect, implying that pragmatics as currently pursued is a discipline without an object, somewhat like the study of humours in ancient medicine. (Origg and Sperber 2000: 156)

If Origg and Sperber are to be believed, there must be quite a number of charlatans out there. I'm one of them.

With all due respect to Origg and Sperber, I find precious little evidence to support intentionalism. I'm willing to grant that many, though not all, utterances license inferences about the speaker's mental state; but that doesn't begin to show that it is their chief purpose to express the speaker's mental state. After all, even if utterances typically convey information about the speaker's gender, that is obviously not what they are for. Moreover, contrary to what Origg and Sperber claim, there are perfectly viable alternatives to the Gricean approach (e.g. Brandom 1994, Geurts 2019).

The objective of this paper is to draw together and elaborate various lines of criticism that have been levelled against mentalist pragmatics, and especially against its Gricean varieties.

### **A dubious dichotomy**

It is agreed by friend and foe alike that the speaker's mental state is not always relevant to the successful performance of a speech act.

I hereby declare the cricket season open.

For an utterance of (1) to be felicitous, there must be an accepted convention to the effect that the cricket season is to be opened at a certain time, by a person who is licensed to do so, using a formula along the lines of (1). If all these conditions are met, an utterance of (1) will be successful, and the cricket season will have been opened. The speaker's mental state is irrelevant, and that includes his communicative intentions, if there be any. There is a consensus on this, and advocates of Gricean pragmatics have solved the problem by gerrymandering: they stipulate a dichotomy between speech acts proper, to which their account applies, and "conventional" speech acts, for which communicative intentions are irrelevant.

On the face of it, this tactic may seem sound, because examples like (1) appear to be special, and a theory shouldn't be blamed for failing to deal with deviant cases. However, on reflection, the dichotomy between proper and conventional speech acts is dubious. Consider permission giving: I grant you permission to use my fountain pen by saying: "You can use my fountain pen." Arguably, it is a convention in English-speaking communities that permission to do so-and-so may be granted by a speaker provided certain conditions are fulfilled; notably, in the case at hand, I must own the fountain pen in question.

If these conditions are met, you will have obtained permission to use my fountain pen, no matter what my mental state may be. This case suggests that giving permission is like opening the cricket season in all relevant respects, and similar cases can be constructed with promises or questions, for example. This is not to imply that it is established to everybody's satisfaction that all these speech act types are conventional; but it is to say that, at the very least, the dichotomy between conventional and non-conventional speech acts is a moot one. It is up to the Griceans to prove that this distinction is not merely an artefact of their view on communication.

### **Developmental issues**

An oft-voiced worry about intentionalism is that it raises the bar for successful communication so high that it becomes impossible to account for the basic fact that children learn to use language for communication well before their school years. If understanding a simple statement like "It's cold" requires an understanding of the speaker's intentions and beliefs, children must be able to attribute these mental states before they can understand statements. But, on the face of it at least, attributing intentions and beliefs is hard, and attributing communicative intentions must be even harder. There is no independent evidence to show that three-year olds have these skills, and such experimental evidence as is currently available suggests that they don't. Therefore, intentionalism seems to entail that preschoolers must be bad at linguistic communication, which is not the case.

This argument hinges on two premisses that may be, and have been, questioned: that attributing intentions and beliefs is hard, and that there is good reason to doubt that three-year olds can attribute these mental states. We'll get to these points presently, but first let's develop the argument in a different direction, starting from the uncontroversial fact that, as things currently stand, there are no well-articulated theoretical models of how children might learn to attribute intentions and beliefs before they start communicating linguistically. That being so, it is tempting to stipulate that mental-state attribution doesn't have to be learned in the first place: it's in the genes. This flight into nativism amounts to passing the buck from development to evolution, because now the question is how our ancestors could have evolved the skill of attributing beliefs and intentions before they were capable of communicating linguistically. And then there is also the matter of explaining how this ability got encoded in our genetic material. Again there are no well-articulated models of how all of this might have happened, which is not surprising, since the phylogenetic problem must be at least as hard as its ontogenetic counterpart.

There are ideas and even theories about how the attribution of beliefs and intentions develops early on in life once children have acquired basic communicative skills (e.g. Jary 2010, van Cleave and Gauker 2010), and some of these ideas and theories may be retooled to develop an evolutionary account

of mental-state attribution (Geurts, in preparation). But clearly this line of thinking reverses the direction of explanation required by mentalist pragmatics, proceeding as it does from communication to attribution instead of the other way round. In the absence of theories that proceed in the opposite direction, this is an argument against mentalism in general, and Gricean pragmatics in particular.

### **Mental-state attribution is no easy matter**

Communicative intentions are higher-order mental states: they are intentions targeted at other mental states, which themselves may be targeted at other mental states. Moreover, communicative intentions are self-referential: the speaker intends the hearer to recognise that very intention. Hence, communicative intentions are complex structures, which is a good reason for supposing that the ability to attribute communicative intentions is hard to acquire, be it ontogenetically or phylogenetically.

But there is another reason as well. Beliefs and intentions are highly abstract in the sense that, generally speaking, they are not readily inferable from their owners' behaviours. Does Alice think that 43 is an irrational number? You may observe her actions for the rest of her life (or your own), and never find out. Ditto for intentions, even if they are at a lesser remove from overt action than beliefs. In this respect, there is a stark contrast with pain, with its characteristic external causes and manifestations. Moreover, pain is associated with salient and distinctive experiential states, which are lacking in beliefs and intentions, as well. Even if the experience of pain is impossible to verbalise, we all know what it is like to have pain; but what is it like to think that 43 is an irrational number? To my mind, the best and most likely response to this question would be a helpless shrug. Given that pain has a distinctive and salient phenomenology, is reliably caused by certain external events, and manifests itself externally in stereotypical ways, it is not too hard to imagine how a child might learn to attribute pain. Beliefs and intentions are quite a different matter.

So there are at least two major challenges for developmental and evolutionary theories of Gricean communication: the abstractness of beliefs and intentions and the complexity of communicative intentions. Recent attempts at simplifying communicative intentions or decomposing them into simpler units that might evolve or be acquired separately leave the first challenge unaddressed (Moore 2017, Sterelny 2018).

The foregoing argument is theoretical; it doesn't rule out the possibility that, as a matter of empirical fact, attributing beliefs and intentions is not as hard as might be expected for theoretical reasons. As it turns out, some authors support the view that the experimental record shows just that, and that infants have the conceptual resources for dealing with communicative intentions, after all. However, the experimental measures that can be used in studies with infants and toddlers are, of necessity, very indirect, or "implicit", as it is sometimes

called. The jump from, e.g., looking-time patterns to belief attribution is quite a big one, and not everybody is prepared to jump that far. Moreover, the quality of the data on which this line of argument hinges is dubious, and that's putting it quite mildly. As discussed by Rakoczy and Behne (2019), most of the experimental measures on which the evidence is based have failed to replicate, and to the extent that they do replicate, their validity is in doubt. "In light of the existing evidence, we do not know whether there is indeed such a thing as implicit [attribution of beliefs and intentions] before age 4." (Rakoczy and Behne 2019: 94)

Summing up: while there are good reasons for supposing that attributing beliefs and intentions is hard and that attributing communicative intentions is even harder, the data that have been claimed to undermine these claims are controversial, as is their interpretation. Hence, the prospects for an account of the ontogenesis and/or phylogenesis of Gricean communication are bleak.

### **Pragmatics is not mind reading**

At the same time that Gricean pragmatics was coming into the ascendant, researchers in psychology, primatology, and the philosophy of mind began discussing mental-state attribution in terms of a variety of new epithets, including "mind reading", "theory of mind", and "mentalising" (I find these labels about equally bad, but will stick with the first). The experimental workhorse of this development was the false-belief task, which became the yardstick for mind-reading ability. The connection between mind reading and mentalist pragmatics was impossible to overlook, and soon the two were regularly conflated: "This paper defends the broadly Gricean view that pragmatic interpretation is ultimately an exercise in mind-reading, involving the inferential attribution of intentions." (Sperber and Wilson 2002: 3)

It seems to have gone unnoticed that these developments gave mentalist pragmatics a radically new turn. The leading idea of mentalist pragmatics was and is that communication is a matter of expressing and recognising mental states, by speaker and hearer, respectively. This was welded to the notion that mind reading does the heavy lifting in pragmatic interpretation. These two ideas are patently distinct, and it is unfortunate that they got mixed up, because, whereas the first idea is not completely off the mark, the second is. As I said before, I consider it plausible that many utterances license inferences about speakers' mental states. This is a mentalist position of sorts, though considerably weaker than the industrial-strength mentalism under discussion. But the notion that most or all pragmatic reasoning is mind reading is supported by neither evidence nor reason.

It's a harsh verdict, I know, but I'll try to back it up by way of a handful of miniature case studies, each of which represents a different kind of puzzle that any pragmatic theory should be able to solve. Here's case number one:

- (1) The ship's engine started to splutter, and the captain decided to head for the nearest port.

Although the word "port" is ambiguous, in (2) there is a strong preference for reading it as "harbour" rather than "fortified red wine", for example. Why? Because this yields the most coherent interpretation for the sentence. This doesn't contradict the view that pragmatic interpretation is an exercise in mind reading, but it isn't evidence for that view, either, because coherence is bound to be a constraint on interpretation for *every* pragmatic theory.

Case number two:

- (2) Bruce was angry with Clyde, because he stole his fountain pen.

Who stole whose fountain pen? The answer is obvious, and for the same reason as before: if we take "he" and "his" to refer to Clyde and Bruce, respectively, we obtain a much more coherent interpretation than if we take it to be the other way round, and as in the previous case there is no reason to suppose that mind reading is involved in the process.

Case number three: I tell you a story about a farmer who caught a burglar in his barn, ending my tale thus:

- (3) The farmer took his shotgun and killed the burglar.

You interpret my utterance as implying that the farmer killed the burglar with his shotgun, even though (4) doesn't state this explicitly. How is that possible? This case is a bit trickier than the first two, but it is clear that, again, coherence is the main factor. Presumably, the conjunction "and" indicates that there is some sort of connection between the farmer's actions, and the supposition that the shotgun was used in the killing establishes such a connection in the most obvious way. No mind reading is required.

More cases could be produced at will, but I trust that my point is clear and strong enough: the notion that pragmatic interpretation is mind reading is a non-starter. This is not to imply that mind reading doesn't play a role in pragmatics. Some stories are impossible to make sense of unless we make substantial suppositions about the protagonists' desires, delusions, motives, and so on. Moreover, once derived, an interpretation, may always be capped by concluding that it was so intended by the speaker; but this is a flourish added after the fact, not a key step in the interpretative process. There is no reason to suppose that mind reading is the driving force of pragmatics.

### **Idle wheels**

A notable feature of the ongoing discourse on communicative intentions is that it tends to focus on *non*-linguistic communication, a trend set by Grice's (1957) landmark paper and continued throughout the subsequent literature. A popular example is holding up an empty glass to signal to your host that a refill would

be appreciated (e.g. Scott-Phillips 2015). One wonders how such cases bear on linguistic communication, but that is never properly explained.

Moreover, it is telling that despite the numerous incarnations which the concept of communicative intention has gone through, its explanatory accomplishments have thus far been decidedly modest. Going through the main topics that pragmatics is about (anaphora, definiteness, presupposition, implicature, and so on), I can think of only one which is regularly associated with communicative intentions, viz. speech acts, and even in this part of the pragmatic literature communicative intentions tend to be idle wheels in the theoretical machinery, as we have seen. It should also be noted that in his own work on presupposition and implicature Grice never even mentions communicative intentions (by this or any other name).

## Conclusion

While I do see a place in pragmatics for some measure of mentalism, I don't have high hopes for intentionalism. All things considered, it seems to me that Gricean pragmatics has done much harm and little good. In particular, it has obstructed progress in theorising about the ontogeny and phylogeny of language and communication. But to end on a happy note, I will conclude by considering to what extent mentalism is on the right track.

I accept that in many cases the hearer will be entitled to infer that the speaker intended her utterance to mean such-and-such, that she believes it to be true that such-and-such, and so on. For example, in the case of (4), the hearer is normally entitled to infer that the speaker believes that the farmer killed the burglar with his shotgun. What's more, this inference is normative: given that she uttered (4), the speaker is *supposed* to have this belief. This much mentalism can be granted while maintaining that we get much of our pragmatic business done without attributing mental states to each other.

To make this a bit more concrete, let me briefly sketch an alternative approach, which accommodates a degree of mentalism, but views communication in a non-mentalist way (see Geurts 2019 for details). Instead of trying to penetrate into the innards of speakers' and hearers' minds, this approach starts at the social level, where speech acts are embedded in interactions that are thoroughly normative. A promise, for example, is a way of undertaking an obligation. It may *also* be a way of expressing an intention, and somehow this aspect will have to be accounted for; but it will be derivative of the social-normative function of promising.

Since the undertaking of an obligation is a social act that creates a normative fact, promising need not involve mental-state attribution. However, my promise doesn't count for much if you have reason to suspect that I might not intend to honour my obligation. This is where mental-state attribution comes in: if you are willing to suppose that I am a cooperative speaker, you are entitled to infer that I intend to make good on my promise.

This view accords an important role to mental-state attribution without making it the hub of linguistic communication. Thus it becomes possible to hold that the development of mental-state attribution is contingent on, and must therefore be preceded by, a substantial level of communicative know-how; and the same may be held for the evolution of mental-state attribution.

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