

## **Context and Conversational Strategy**

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Bertrand Russell to Oswald Mosley, who, in the 1960's, had invited him to engage in a public debate about the merits of fascism. Here is his response:

Dear Sir Oswald,

Thank you for your letter and for your enclosures. I have given some thought to our recent correspondence. It is always difficult to decide on how to respond to people whose ethos is so alien and, in fact, repellent to one's own. It is not that I take exception to the general points made by you but that every ounce of my energy has been devoted to an active opposition to cruel bigotry, compulsive violence, and the sadistic persecution which has characterized the philosophy and practice of fascism.

I feel obliged to say that the emotional universes we inhabit are so distinct, and in deepest ways opposed, that nothing fruitful or sincere could ever emerge from association between us.

I should like you to understand the intensity of this conviction on my part. It is not out of any attempt to be rude that I say this but because of all that I value in human experience and human achievement.

Yours sincerely,

Bertrand Russell

### **Context as common ground**

Context is represented as an evolving body of information, modeled by a set of possible worlds (or possible situations). This body of information has two interacting roles: (1) it is the information that is available as a resource for the interpretation of speech (for figuring out what other speakers mean by what they say, and for planning what to mean to use, given what one wants one's interlocutor to take you to be saying) (2) It is a representation of the possibilities that speakers in the context are aiming to distinguish between (or at least a representation of the possibilities that they represent themselves to be aiming to distinguish between).

The interaction: A prior context influences what one's utterances are taken to say and mean, and what they are taken to say and mean will then influence the way the context changes. This gives rise to the possibility that there may be systematic relations (including inferential relations) between successive speech acts that are explained by the way that earlier speech acts influence the context in which later speech acts are interpreted.

The (over) simple paradigm of a speech situation: speakers each have some information not available to the others that they want to share. They ask questions to identify information they lack, and make statements to bring information into the common ground. This is a good paradigm for illustrating the interaction of context and content, but it is important to recognize the role of context in more contentious situations where disagreement and conflict of interest predominate, and the role of context in the strategic reasoning of participants in such

conversations. Speakers don't just pool information: they negotiate and debate. And the information that is presumed to be common and the questions that may be in dispute may be information and questions about what to do, or what values to have, and not just factual information, and factual questions. But the presumption that some information and values are shared is necessary for the possibility of communication, even in situations of acknowledged conflict, so a central concern will be with the role of common knowledge and common interest in conversational strategy.

## The Gricean program

Gricean methodology: The basic concepts used to characterize communication and communicative practices should be understood functionally, and independently of the linguistic devices that serve the functions. We should separate the question, what is it to *mean* something – to intend to communicate some information – from the question, what are the means we use to communicate. Grice thought of a language as a device for meaning things. We need to know what it is to mean things in order to formulate clearly the questions about how it does it.

Grice's central concept was the notion of *speaker meaning*. The basic idea was simple and fruitful, even if the details of outdated project of giving precise and counterexample-free necessary and sufficient conditions for speaker meaning remain hard to pin down.

“A meant<sub>NN</sub> something by x” is roughly equivalent to “A uttered x with the intention of inducing a belief by means of the recognition of this intention.”

Paul Grice, “Meaning”

Grice's account of speaker meaning gives rise to two questions about any putative case in which someone means that P by uttering x:

(1) Why should uttering x be a way to get the addressee to recognize the speaker's intention to induce in him the belief that P?

(2) Why should getting the addressee to recognize the speaker's intention to induce in him the belief that P be a way of inducing in him the belief that P?

The first question will be answered in different ways for different cases. It is not part of the concept of speaker meaning that there be any particular explanation for the speaker's presumption that the addressee will recognize her intention. One might exploit natural signs, such as smiles, frowns, and pointing gestures, which tend (perhaps innately) certain expectations, and to be recognized to do so. Or one might use a conventional device (a language) that establishes, by precedent, recognized relations between utterances and items of information (propositions).

The second question will have an answer only if the speaker presumes that there is enough common interest between speaker and addressee so that the message will be *credible*. Credibility requires that the hearer believes that the speaker will want the hearer to believe that P only if P is true. (So that they have a common interest in the addressee believing it.)

Since credibility is necessary for the possibility of successful communication, this is the basis for 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.

The concept of speaker meaning helps to explain why communication requires a significant amount of common *knowledge* (so that there will be an answer to question 1), and a significant amount of common *interest* (so that there will be an answer to question 2). That is, it helps to explain why a notion of *common ground* should be expected to play a central role in the representation of communication.

### **The game analogy**

Wittgenstein famously talked of language games, and many other philosophers have used the analogy between discourse and games. The analogy is a rich one, with different facets:

Some philosophers of language, such as John Austin and John Searle, have emphasized the idea of a game as a conventional practice with constitutive rules, and types of actions that are intelligible only in the context of the game (scoring goals, taking tricks, putting one's opponent's king in check) Austin argued that *illocutionary acts* were actions of this kind.

Other philosophers have based the analogy on the more general observation that conversation is a case of the interaction of rational agents with a mix of common and conflicting interests – the kind of situation that game theory is designed to model. On this picture, the interaction is governed, not by constitutive rules, but by the beliefs and values of the interacting rational agents.

The Gricean program suggests this latter use of the analogy; the application of game theory to the practice of speech seems particularly appropriate for Grice's project, given his emphasis on the kind of iterative attitudes (beliefs about the beliefs of others, and intentions to influence beliefs and intentions of others) that game theoretic reasoning appeals to. But the strategic reasoning that Grice describes also involves language as a conventional device – a game in the first sense – since a central part of his story is about the way the conventions of a language are exploited to use expressions to mean things different from what the conventional rules say that they mean.

### **Exploitation**

Grice's most famous idea is the notion of *conversational implicature*, which is way of meaning things different from what is said. Conversational implicature is just one use of a broader strategy of *exploitation* of a conventional language - a strategy that may play an important role in the strategic use of language in more contentious situations. The general pattern of reasoning is something like this: one says something that would be rationally appropriate (given the presumption that the participants in the conversation are engaged in a cooperative enterprise) only if certain conditions (concerning the attitudes and values of the participants). If this

presumption is sufficiently obvious, it may be reasonable to conclude that the speaker intended the addressee to take the speaker to intend to change the situation so that they are met. This will then be a case of speaker meaning something without saying it. Some cases of exploitation are cases where what the speaker “made as if to say” was not just prima facie inappropriate, but manifestly false. In such cases, the presumption of cooperative speech requires reinterpretation: one means something incompatible with what one appears, prima facie, to be saying.

This kind of pattern gives rise to a contrast between levels of common ground that parallels the Gricean distinction between saying (or making as if to say) and meaning. Common ground is not the same as common belief or common knowledge, since various kinds of exploitation may involve the pretense that something is common ground when it is not, or the pretense that some possibility is a live option when it is really not. One sometimes talks of the “conversational record” – a kind of “official” set of open possibilities that may diverge, not just from what conversational participants privately believe, but from what they all recognize as common belief. I suspect that there are probably multiple layers of common ground whose interaction plays a role in strategic reasoning about what to say, and how to interpret what is said.

The Gricean patterns of conversational strategy can give rise to exploitation of a more insidious kind – the manipulation of context with the aim of controlling beliefs and behavior, preventing the possibility of communication, communicating while avoiding responsibility, or creating an illusion that certain things are at issue when they are not. It is an irony of the Gricean framework that the centrality of the notions of cooperation, common ground, and the rationality of discourse can help to explain how language is used to subvert the enterprise of rational communication.