

Convention, Intention, and the Conversational Record:
A response to Lepore and Stone 2015

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Abstract

Lepore and Stone 2015 advocate a view which turns the Gricean picture of meaning on its head: they argue that the most basic type of meaning intention is one which presupposes the notion of conventional meaning. In this essay, I argue that evidence from language acquisition supports the Gricean view according to which communicative intentions are analytically more basic than convention. Lepore and Stone extend their convention-driven view by advocating a model on which the Conversational Record reflects only conventionally licensed conversational updates. I present evidence from conversation that shows that such a view of the record cannot account for certain types of standard conversational events.

1. Introduction

This essay concerns one of the central claims made by Lepore and Stone (henceforward, L&S) in their 2015 book, *Imagination and Convention*. The claim is this: Aspects of speaker intention identifiable through general inferential processes are not part of the content to which speakers become publicly committed by their linguistic utterances, even though these intentions may be transparently recognized by interlocutors. The argument for this conclusion has two prongs. The first prong of the argument is driven by various empirical arguments. L&S look at a variety of phenomena that have been claimed to involve non-conventionalized elements, and argue against the inferentialist accounts. So, one way to push back against their arguments is to undermine one or more of these arguments. While I think this push back is invited in various places, I will not take on that project here.

The second prong of their argument is driven by more abstract theoretical considerations. The general idea, as I understand it, is this: The intentions that a speaker has in making an utterance are indeterminately complex. These intentions form a sort of web that radiates out from a basic intention to ever more complex intentions about the ultimate effects of the utterance. L&S argue that the only way to delineate an intention which can count as a truly linguistically relevant intention – an intention whereby we can delineate meaning – is one which makes crucial reference to linguistic convention.

Their picture thus turns the Gricean view on its head. Instead of speaker intentions underlying convention, they propose that convention underlies, and is essential to, speaker intentions.

My main goal in this essay is to present difficulties for their inverted Gricean picture. I will give both conceptual and empirical arguments that intentions are analytically prior to linguistic conventions, and hence giving an analysis of meaning in terms of intentions seems unavoidable. I'll point out, along the way (although this is not one of my major concerns here) that their criticisms of Grice are to some extent misdirected, as they neglect Grice's distinction between speaker meaning and (conventional) expression meaning. I'll then go on to argue that their conception of a conversational scoreboard which registers only conventionally licensed update lacks the resources to model certain types of standard conversational events.

2. On Speaker Meaning vs. Sentence Meaning

Can linguistic meaning be analyzed in terms of speaker intention? L&S argue that it cannot. The central argument for this position, developed in chapter 13, targets what they call *prospective intentionalism*, the view that "meaning directly reports the speaker's commitments and expectations in using an utterance" (216). They attribute this view to Grice, and so take their position to be in opposition to his. Later in this section, I'll argue that this attribution is incorrect. But I begin by reviewing the argument itself.

The central argument is articulated in this paragraph:

We normally undertake our utterances not only with the intention of updating the conversation, but also with further intentions about how these moves will advance our joint problem solving and our other practical interests. This continuity underscores the close link between conversation and practical collaborations. But **it is this very continuity that renders us skeptical — pace Grice — that the distinctive place of meaning in language can be captured with reference to the broad and eclectic network of our intentions in communicative action.** [pps. 210-11; emphasis added]

To paraphrase: Every linguistic utterance is associated with a complex set of intentions of different types, that "radiate out" from the action. These intentions cannot be straightforwardly separated from each other. If we identify the meaning of an utterance simply with the intentions that the speaker had in uttering it, then we will find ourselves assigning to utterances hopelessly complex meanings that

are far removed from what is linguistically determined. Hence, the project of analyzing linguistic meaning in terms of such intentions is hopeless.

L&S, though, fully acknowledge that intention recognition is a vital part of the communicative process. Despite their allusion to the continuity of intentions in the paragraph just quoted, they propose (section 13.2) a very specific taxonomy of intentions, with subtypes of intention distinguishable by various criteria. At the root of this taxonomy is a *basic intention*, which they characterize as follows: The agent uses basic intentions directly in the control of action; basic intentions are concrete and explicit, and must target objects that the agent can interact with directly and to which the agent can envisage changes that align with the agent's fundamental capabilities (p.208). They go on: "'We think of a person picking up an object seen at arm's reach as a prototypical case: The basic intention is to GRASP THAT THING. The actions involved are **affordances**, effects that agents can bring about just in virtue of the kind of being that they are and the kind of engagement they have with the world."

L&S propose that every utterance is accompanied by a basic intention: the intention to contribute the grammatically specified meaning of the utterance to the ongoing conversation. *Grammar* here should be construed broadly to include any and all linguistic rules or conventions which contribute to the determination of meaning.¹ It's clear from their further arguments that this intention is supposed to be *de dicto*: the speaker's basic intention is to contribute the grammatically specified meaning of her utterance, whatever it might be, whether or not she knows what it is.

Thus, in what appears to be a complete reversal of the Gricean picture, they propose that linguistic convention is analytically prior to the most basic type of linguistically relevant intention. Restating their view somewhat, we might say that for them, the most basic communicative intention an agent can have is to participate in the conventions of the language community whose language they are using. And this, for L&S, is the *only* intention which is relevant in discussion of the meaning of linguistic utterances.

Now that we have outlined L&S's view, let's take a step back to look more carefully at the Gricean view. It's important to remember, as Neale 1992 articulates, that Grice's project has two parts: Neale

¹ It might be thought that when the string uttered is syntactically or lexically ambiguous, grammar could not (even on L&S's strong conventionalist view) specify a unique meaning for the utterance. However, L&S *do* allow that speaker intentions determine the structural properties of the utterance, and also determine which of a collection of homophones counts as occurring in the utterance. As they put it, human language users have the capacity to "[perform] an utterance of a specified linguistic structure." (p.208)

calls them The Theory of Meaning and The Theory of Conversation. Neal further emphasizes that these are not two *separate* projects, but two halves of *one* integrated project.

The Theory of Meaning aims to provide a reductive analysis of the notion of meaning, and it is within this part of his project that Grice famously attempts to reduce meaning to intentions. He proposes that the analysis of meaning (of any action) requires that we begin with speaker meaning (speaker construed broadly); and speaker meaning is characterized in terms of the intentions of the speaker. But this is crucially *not* an analysis of the *process* of utterance interpretation. Grice's understanding of *this* process is seen in his work on implicature, where of course the notion of *conventional sentence meaning* plays a central role. If it were the case that Grice thought that a speaker's communicative intentions determined the *linguistic* meaning of her utterances then there would be no need for a theory of conversational implicature!

Grice's attempts to formulate a notion of (what we might call) conventional meaning are articulated in his paper "Utterer's Meaning, Sentence-Meaning and Word Meaning," Essay 6 of *Studies in the Way of Words*. The goal of these attempts is precisely to distinguish what a *sentence* (or expression) means from what a particular *utterance* of a sentence/expression means, and in turn to distinguish these from what a *speaker* means on a particular occasion of use.² The closest Grice gets to a definition of sentence/expression meaning (for a declarative utterance) is this³:

"For group G, utterance-type X means that *p*" =_{df} "At least some (many) members of group G have in their repertoires the procedure of uttering a token of X if, for some A, they want A to believe that *p*, the retention of this procedure being for them conditional on the assumption that at least some (other) members of G have, or have had, this procedure in their repertoires."
(*Studies*, p.127)

² I will use the term *sentence/expression meaning* for Grice's "timeless meaning of an expression type," and the term *utterance meaning* for Grice's "applied timeless meaning for an expression type." The latter terminology is admittedly generous to Grice: the difference between timeless meaning and applied timeless meaning for Grice involves only disambiguation, whereas I take it that utterance meaning involves not only disambiguation but also the resolution of context dependencies, such as the reference of pronouns.

³ This is modified from the original, which is formulated to generalize over utterances of any force. For simplicity, I use belief inducement as the basic intention associated with declaratives, although this is not Grice's final view on the matter.

Grice recognizes that this attempt is incomplete in various ways; how to improve it is not the current issue. The point rather is to emphasize that Grice does indeed have a notion of what a sentence or an utterance of a sentence means which is distinct from what the speaker means on a particular occasion of use of the sentence; and that Grice at least hoped that the notions of sentence meaning and utterance meaning could be spelled out in terms of the linguistic behaviors of groups of agents with particular intentions/desires.

Thus, Grice does not subscribe to the theory of *prospective intentionalism* which L&S contrast with their own. For on that theory, the meaning of an uttered expression depends on the “occurrent attitudes” (p.205) of the speaker⁴. But on Grice’s theory – or at least, on the theory that he envisaged – the meaning of an uttered expression depends (roughly speaking) on some kind of generalization over the attitudes of members of a community who have used, or have the potential to use, the uttered sentence type. Speaker meaning, indeed, is a matter of the occurrent attitudes of the speaker; but this is a distinct matter, to which we now turn.

Here is the basic picture, no doubt familiar to most readers, of how addressees are expected to identify speaker meaning, given a linguistic utterance. As a first step, addressees identify *what is said*: what we characterized above as utterance meaning (for Grice, applied timeless meaning of the expression type uttered). Then, addressees reason about whether or not what is said could be (the whole of) what the speaker meant, given the assumption that the speaker is behaving cooperatively. If not, then further reasoning brings them to a determination of speaker meaning.

Several things should be noted here. First, it is not the case that speaker intentions on a particular occasion determine what the words or sentences they utter mean on that occasion, beyond the power of those intentions to determine a particular disambiguation of the string uttered. Second, the intentions with which a (rational) speaker can use a particular form are constrained by the conventional meaning of that form. Suppose that I say to an interlocutor with whom I have no special history, “I am allergic to cat hair.” Suppose that I intend to get that interlocutor to come to believe that I am allergic to *dog* hair. Well (in the absence of any context), too bad. I simply *shouldn’t* utter that

⁴ L&S do take prospective intentionalism to be Grice’s theory. On p.205, they say:

On the Gricean account, meaning depends on the speaker’s occurrent attitudes: The specific goals, beliefs and expectations that eventuate in the speaker’s choice of some particular utterance on some particular occasion.

As noted, this is a correct characterization of *speaker meaning* associated with an utterance, but not of sentence or utterance meaning. L&S go on to say: “The alternative would be to attribute meaning based on *STANDING* commitments among interlocutors.” One might plausibly say that Grice’s envisioned account of sentence meaning is based on such standing commitments.

sentence with that intention. Because (in the absence of special background knowledge), there is no reason for an English speaker who hears me say “I am allergic to cat hair” to form the belief that I intend them to recognize that I intend to convey that I am allergic to dog hair. In other words: the existing norms, within the speech community, for the use of particular expressions heavily constrain which utterances a speaker can reasonably use to carry out her communicative intentions.

With the Gricean picture clarified in this way, I find it difficult to see how the view that L&S advocate is radically different from the Gricean Theory of Conversation. L&S emphatically acknowledge that speakers may use sentences with communicative intentions which go beyond the meanings of the sentences used; so does Grice. L&S propose that we should characterize the meanings of sentences in terms of the conventions which govern their use; so does Grice. One difference is that L&S seem to be driven by an underlying desire to identify one, and only one, thing as meaning. Grice, on the other hand, acknowledges a variety of types of meaning, associated with different things: speaker meanings, utterance meanings, and sentence meanings. In particular, Grice uses the term *speaker meaning* for the contents with respect to which speakers have communicative intentions, and clearly takes it as given that these intentions can be somehow delimited. L&S assign no special status to additional inferences about speaker intentions (although they do not deny that they take place); there is nothing to which they apply the term *speaker meaning*. Their motivation is in part the belief that whatever Grice intends speaker meaning to be cannot be delimited. This contention is the subject of the next section.

3. The analytical priority of intentions

I have just suggested that where the L&S model addresses the same issues as Grice’s Theory of Conversation, there is little substantive difference between them (although certainly there is disagreement over where the theory has application). However, there is a major difference between the L&S model and Grice’s Theory of Meaning. For L&S, linguistic conventions are (not only practically but also) *analytically* basic. For Grice, although conventional meaning is basic in the practical matter of reconstructing a speaker’s intentions, those intentions are analytically basic: the notion of conventional meaning is to be analyzed in terms of the communicative intentions which speakers generally have when they use those expressions. In what follows, I give an argument that communicative intentions indeed are analytically prior to conventions.

3.1. Delimitability of meaning-determining intentions: intentions in language learning

When children learn their first language, what they learn is (at least) the conventions governing that language, including the conventional meanings of its expressions. How do children learn the meanings of expressions? Perhaps the most venerable picture of word learning is that children learn the meanings of expressions by observing particulars of the situation in which the expression is used. “A rabbit scurries by, the native [or parent] says ‘Gavagai’, and the linguist [or language learner] notes down the sentence ‘Rabbit’ (or ‘Lo, a rabbit,’) as a tentative translation, subject to testing in further cases.” (Quine, 1960: 29). Quine is famously skeptical that this procedure results in a definitive understanding of what ‘Gavagai’, or any other term, means. The observable stimulus – the world itself – doesn’t provide enough constraints to allow the language learner to determine precisely what aspect of the stimulus the linguistic behavior observed corresponds to. Wittgenstein 1953 similarly points out that ostension, as a means of identifying the referent of an expression, is fundamentally ambiguous: “An ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *every* case” (§28). Unfortunately, there is no getting around the fact that every child acquiring a language is in the same position as Quine’s linguist. Yet children do, somehow, learn the language of their speech community.

The question of how children solve the problem of referential indeterminacy is a long standing concern of research on language acquisition. The consensus is that something more than observation of the state of the world is necessary in order for language learners to identify the meanings of expressions. One widely held view is that children come into the world endowed with various innate constraints on the (presumed) word-to-world mapping (Markman 1989, 1994). There are a number of challenges for this view (see Deák 2000, Bloom 2002), but even if it is correct, it is acknowledged to provide only a partial answer to the question. It might tell us why, when the rabbit hops by and the adult says, “Look, a rabbit!” the child takes the word to name the rabbit rather than, say, rabbit fur. But it doesn’t tell us why the child takes the word to name something related to the rabbit rather than, say, the patch of grass on which the rabbit is sitting. This aspect of the word learning problem (as well as the more Quinean one) is addressed by a second approach which has been advocated in particular by Paul Bloom and Michael Tomasello (Bloom 2000, 2002, Tomasello 2001, 2003 i.a.). According to this view, children solve the problem by being what Bloom calls “mindreaders.” As Tomasello puts it, children utilize their social cognitive skills to “perceive the intentions of the adult as she acts and speaks to the child” (2001: 133). Putting it crudely, both advocate a view on which children learn conventions by recognizing intentions.

There are now very many experimental results that demonstrate that young children use information about adult speakers' intentions in inferring the meanings of new words. For example, when 18 month olds are attending to some object (say, playing with a toy for which they do not have a name), and then hear an adult say "Look, a modi!", they will shift their attention to whatever the speaker is looking at, and will associate the new word with that object (Baldwin 1991, 1993). Two year olds who hear an adult use a new word while engaging in a previously unnamed action involving a previously unnamed object will differentially associate the word with either the action or the object, depending on which of them the adult can plausibly be assumed to be referring to (Tomasello & Akhtar 1995, study 1). Two year olds who hear an adult state an intention to do something using a novel verb (e.g. *I'm going to plunk Big Bird*), and then observe the adult performing one intentional action and one that is marked as unintentional (e.g. accompanied by *whoops*), reliably take the new word to denote the intentional action (Tomasello & Barton 1994, Study 3). This involves fairly complex reasoning: the experimenter announces an intention to do something, then does something accidentally. From the perspective of the child, the experimenter could not, at the time of speaking, have known that she would perform that act; therefore, she could not have intended to name it when she announced her future act. The only act the experimenter could have intended to name was the one subsequently performed intentionally; and this is the act that children take the new word to name.

None of the results are terribly surprising. These young children assign meanings in the same way that most adults would. But this is the point: we use our knowledge of normal human behavior to make inferences about what a speaker plausibly intends to refer to, or exclaim about, and we associate the new word with that referent. The results from small children show that this is not just something that adults who are already fully competent language users do; it is what children do – and arguably, need to be able to do – in order to acquire their first language. If Bloom and Tomasello and others of their school are right, then children learn words by identifying the intentions of speakers who use them. If that is right, then L&S's claim that meaning-determining intentions are in principle not delimitable cannot be correct.

L&S might respond in the following way. The intentions that are being recognized are not meaning-determining. It is the conventions governing the word that determine its meaning. Language learners indeed do pay attention to speaker intentions, but only with the goal of inferring the conventions that govern the word, given the assumption that speakers generally intend to use words in accord with convention. However, this way of thinking about what language learners are doing seems implausible: language learners acquire conventions, but can hardly be thought to come to the language learning task

equipped with the idea of a convention. More importantly, though, even if this characterization of the process were correct (as in fact it might be for adult learners acquiring the meaning of a new word) it does not undermine the core point, namely, that a speaker intention *can* suffice to delimit meaning. According to the view on which intentions are convention determining, the story goes like this: When I say “jog,” I intend to speak about jogging. I can have this intention because that is what the word conventionally means. By recognizing that this is what I intend when I use the word, a learner learns the convention. But if intention recognition can provide the information needed for this learning, task, then it also provides enough information to learn: “When people have this intention, they use this word,” i.e. enough information to be meaning-determining.

In conversation, Matthew Stone has raised a different objection to the argument given here. He points out that according to Grice, meaning-determining intentions are specifically *communicative* intentions (intentions to induce a particular kind of change in the audience’s intensional state). The experimental evidence does not show that children (or adults) are using recognition of intentions of this special sort to acquire the meanings of words.

My response to this objection is two fold. First, the argument in L&S is not that Gricean communicative intentions are of the wrong sort to be meaning determining, but rather that it is in principle not possible to delimit a meaning-determining intention. Certainly, there are objections that have been and can be raised against the Gricean definition of a meaning-determining intention; but this is not currently our concern. Secondly, there is a body of experimental work which is argued to show that even very young children distinguish between communicative and non-communicative non-linguistic acts, and respond to them differently (e.g. Behne, Carpenter & Tomasello 2005, Moore et al. 2015). This experimental literature suggests that children, from a very young age, pay special attention to what they recognize as communicative acts; and that when they understand an act in this way, they attempt to identify the associated intention. This does not yet tell us that learners attempt to identify a specifically communicative intention in the process of identifying expression meaning. But it does tell us that they at least have the capacity to do so.

L&S are clearly correct when they point out that almost every linguistic utterance is produced with a panoply of intentions, many of which cannot be thought to relate to the meaning of the expression produced. But the role of intention recognition in word learning suggests that out of the “blooming, buzzing confusion” of intentions that surround an utterance, learners can indeed identify some core intention which corresponds to the meaning of the word.

3.2. Conventions from intentions: the analytical priority of intention

The argument so far has been an empirical rejoinder to L&S's theoretical claim that meaning-determining intentions are not delimitable. The response comes from the evidence that intention recognition plays a central role in word learning, which it could not do if L&S's claim were correct. I now expand this response to recapitulate Grice's claim that communicative intention is analytically prior to linguistic convention.

We noted at starting that what children learn when they learn a language are the conventions that govern that language. When children learn a word, they not only learn that *this* speaker used this word on a particular occasion with a particular meaning. They learn that *in general* this word is used with that meaning, and that they themselves can use the word to express that meaning. And they must learn this by observations of the linguistic behavior of others, because that is all that they have to go on.

But the conclusion of the previous section was that the crucial observations about the linguistic behavior of others are observations about the intentions with which they produce particular utterances. What children observe and learn from are not simply word-world correlations, but rather word-intention correlations. When they acquire the convention governing a word, it must be through some generalization over the observations they have made, namely, a generalization about the intentions which speakers have when they use particular expressions.

And this brings us directly back to a Gricean characterization of conventions of meaning. As emphasized in section 2, Grice fully recognized the need for a concept of conventional meaning. In line with his view that the fundamental notion of meaning is speaker meaning, he builds the notion of conventional meaning from this primary notion. For Grice, what it is for a speaker to mean x by utterance U is for the speaker to produce U with a certain special kind of intention involving x — what we now call a communicative intention. Conventional meanings for expressions, then, will be generalizations about the communicative intentions that speakers tend to have when producing U . And this is just what we should expect if, indeed, the crucial observations that language learners generalize from to develop their conventional language are observations about speaker intentions. The picture is thus one on which intention is analytically (and ontogenetically) prior to convention.

4. Intentions on the scoreboard

In Chapter 14 of their book, L&S lay out the framework which allows them to clearly articulate their conception of semantic content. In this section, I'll begin by recapitulating their proposal, and then move on to challenge one of its fundamental claims.

L&S adopt a Lewisian Conversational Record (CR) as the structure for modeling linguistic content. What is novel in their version of the conversational record is that the Record reflects *only* what is determined by linguistic convention. As such, it is an *objective* record of what the discourse participants are committed to by virtue of the conventional contents of their linguistic acts – regardless of whether any actual participant knows or believes that they are. The Record is *restricted* to these conventionally incurred commitments. Anything conveyed via nonconventional means – implicatures (if there are any), hints, metaphorically communicated content – lives elsewhere. It may be part of what the interlocutors know or believe about one another; it may be in the common ground of the conversation, which L&S exclude from the Record. But it is not part of the Record.

Let's look at one of L&S's examples in order to get clear on the view. They offer the following invented conversation, where a misunderstanding occurs (their (207), p.254).

- (1) a. A: We're going to the bank after this.
b. B: Great! Are Kim and Sandy going too?
c. A: Why would they go?
d. B: They always like the river...
e. A: But we're going to the Wells Fargo office!

The crucial issue here is the content of the second utterance, b. The later conversation shows that A, when she says *bank*, intends to refer to a financial institution; B misunderstands, and thinks that A is talking about a river bank. So, which of these gets to be part of the content of B's first utterance? According to L&S, "B inadvertently asks at [(1b.)] whether Kim and Sandy are going along to the financial institution, and B's contribution at [1d.] is an irrelevant one given the true history of the conversation." (p.254).

Note the crucial role of linguistic rule in this account. B's question involves ellipsis, licensed by identity of the elided element with the PP *to the bank* in A's prior utterance. Plausibly, the rule for ellipsis requires that an elided constituent be semantically identical to its antecedent. By this rule, B's utterance is *required* to be a question about the Wells Fargo office, regardless of B's intention. According to L&S, this linguistic rule determines the meaning of B's utterance, and hence the update to the conversational Record.

In this section, I will explore this strict conventionalist treatment of the Conversational Record. Let us for current purposes grant L&S's position that for every utterance U, there are linguistic rules which

fully determine a specific update to the Record. The question I now pose is this: Does a Record limited to being updated only and strictly in accord with these rules have an explanatory role to play in our theory of linguistic meaning or in a theory of communication based on it?

I suggest that the place to look for evidence here is in the dynamics of conversation. The whole point of a Conversational Record is that it is dynamic. It is continuously updated by conversational contributions, but at the same time imposes constraints on possible contributions. If the object that plays this role is as L&S argue, then we should see the effects of its purely conventional nature in constraints that affect allowable conversational moves. I'll argue that in fact these moves suggest that the Record is a far more flexible matter than L&S would like.

4.1. Mis-speaking

My father, like many other fathers, sometimes mistakenly switches the names of his grandchildren. Sometimes he uses my son's name, Isaac, when he means to refer to my nephew Alon, or vice versa. Sometimes he catches himself in his mistake and self-corrects, and sometimes not.

Suppose I am talking to my father on the phone, and he says (2):

(2) Alon looked very impressive in his kung fu performance.

It's obvious to me that he intends to say that *Isaac* looked very impressive. My father knows the difference between his two grandsons. He knows that Isaac does kung fu, but Alon doesn't, and I have recently sent him video of Isaac in a kung fu performance.

There are various responses that are open to me at this point. One option is to point out the error ("You said 'Alon' instead of 'Isaac.'") Another option might be to pick up on the proposition expressed by the sentence actually uttered: I might laugh and say, "Oh, is Alon doing kung fu now?" But another option would be to ignore the error, and proceed *as if* my father had in fact said what he meant to say. In particular, I might say:

(3) Yes, he's been practicing a lot recently.

And then our conversation might continue with a sequence of utterances containing the pronoun *he*, which both my father and I would take to refer to Isaac.

What would L&S say about this case? According to them, what goes on the Record is the conventional content of my father's utterance. Hence, after my father's utterance of (2), my nephew Alon becomes the highest ranked potential referent for a masculine pronoun. Isaac, who hasn't been mentioned, is not available on the stack at all (or at least would be low ranked). And so *he*, in my utterance of (3), presumably should, by convention, refer to Alon; and Alon should be the subject of our continuing conversation. According to the L&S view, the Conversational Record records this conversation which no-one has actually had, but which is the conversation we would have had if I had ignored my father's obvious intention and had paid attention only to the conventional content of his utterance.

One problem with this model is that it doesn't seem like a very good model of what is actually going on in this conversational exchange. An additional and in some sense more severe problem is that the Record now cannot play the role in the theory that it is supposed to play, as we can see by considering what happens as the conversation proceeds.

After this brief conversational glitch, my conversation with my father is still governed by the standard rules of play. This applies even to my use of pronouns. Now that we are using *he* to refer to Isaac, I can't suddenly use *he* to refer to Alon, or anyone else. With the referent of *he* set to Isaac, if I say:

(4) Yes, and he has a birthday coming up soon

I can only continue to refer to Isaac. It would be natural to explain this constraint in terms of the behavior of the Record — but on L&S's picture, we can't. L&S's Record is busy recording a conversation we are not having about Alon, so can't be invoked to explain why *he* cannot now felicitously be used to refer to Alon.

And of course all the other ordinary constraints governing conversational update apply to my ongoing conversation with my father. All of these constraints are supposed to be characterizable in terms of properties of the Record. But the conversation I'm actually having with my father isn't *on* the Record, on the L&S view. So it's unclear how the Record can function to constrain it.

Here is what L&S say about how cases such as these look from a Gricean perspective. The discussion pertains to Kripke's famous Jones/Smith case (Kripke 1977), where an utterance of *Jones*

is raking the leaves today is used to say something about Smith.⁵ I quote at some length because I think the passage is important.

In cases such as [these], the Gricean view has difficulty distinguishing among the various commitments the speaker has made. ... The speaker of [*Jones is raking the leaves today*] intends to contribute that that person, [the person being observed], is raking the leaves, and she also intends to contribute the conventional meaning of what she said, which is in fact that Jones is raking the leaves. ... We seem to be equally justified in reporting the situation with either perspective. ... By contrast, our view articulates a clear standard that privileges conventional meaning in each of these cases. (pp.218-219)

L&S clearly take it to be a failing of the model that it allows us to “report the situation with either perspective.” But the empirical observations suggest that this is exactly what we want. After the mis-spoken utterance, it is my *choice* as the addressee which intention to utilize in updating the Record. That choice then governs what contributions are appropriate as the conversation continues.

It is worth emphasizing, as this passage from L&S makes clear, that the Gricean view allows us to talk about the conventional meaning of utterances. It is this conventional meaning that constitutes *what is said*. So some of the further criticisms that L&S raise in the continuation of this passage seem misplaced. In favor of their view, they point out (p.219) that it allows us to characterize a speaker as “meaning something that she didn’t think she intended. The meaning we ascribe to her can differ from how she would have described it herself.” They go on: “For prospective intentionalism, this is very hard to do.”

While for Grice it is indeed incoherent to say that a *speaker* meant something that she did not intend, it is entirely coherent to say that a speaker’s *uttered sentence* meant something that she did not intend. We can also say that a speaker’s belief that she can accomplish her communicative intention by uttering a particular sentence is mistaken. As far as I can see, this allows us to capture all of the

⁵ There’s an important difference between Kripke’s case and mine. In Kripke’s case, the speaker has *misidentified* the man. He thinks the man in question *is* Jones. He didn’t mis-speak; he used the correct name for the individual he thought was raking leaves. It just so happens that he also meant to be talking about the person he and his interlocutor are currently observing; and the problem is that he has a false belief about that person (i.e. that he is Jones). My father, on the other hand, in the case I constructed, never had any intention to say anything about Alon.

distinctions that we need, without the problematic restriction of the Conversational Record to conventionally contributed content.

4.1.1 An aside on basic intentions

On the L&S picture, intentions still have a role to play in the determination of (conventional utterance) meaning. The basic intentions of the speaker have the role of converting an ambiguous string into an unambiguous syntactic structure. For example, if a speaker utters the sentence *Jane hit the man with the baseball bat*, intending *with the baseball bat* as a modifier of *man*, this intention determines that *that is* the sentence she has uttered.

Part of the appeal of these basic intentions for L&S seems to be their transparency. When a speaker says *Jones is raking the leaves today*, we can “read off” the basic intention from the utterance itself: The speaker has uttered *this sentence*, so her basic intention is to contribute one of the grammatically specified meanings of this string to the conversation. This is the source of the conflict in the Jones/Smith case: the speaker’s two intentions – the intention to talk about the person she is looking at, and the intention to talk about the person conventionally designated by the name *Jones* – do not coincide, although the speaker thinks that they do.

In the case of mis-speaking that I have been exploring, the situation is different. It seems reasonable to say that my father *never* had the intention of contributing to the conversation the grammatically specified meaning of sentence (2) above. He intended to talk about Isaac, knowing that Isaac’s name is *Isaac*, and knowing that the name *Alon* is not a conventional means (or any kind of means) for designating Isaac. The utterance of the name *Alon* seems like a misfire of the basic intention. We certainly have such misfires in the nonlinguistic case. Suppose, for example, I observe a hammer on a table within my reach, and form the basic intention to *grasp that thing*, which sets my motor system into action. But as I reach out, I have a sudden attack of double vision and inadvertently grasp the screwdriver that was on the table next to the hammer. There was never any intention to grasp the screwdriver, but there it is in my hand.

But perhaps this observation provides a solution for the dilemma I raised above. Suppose L&S take me up on this idea. Now they can say this: In this case of a misfire of the basic intention, it is still that intention which should determine the updates to the Conversational Record. There *is* an English sentence — sentence (5) below — with respect to which my father had a basic intention to contribute its grammatically specified meaning to the conversation.

(5) Isaac looked very impressive in his kung fu performance.

It's the conventional content of *this* sentence that should determine the updates to the Record, and hence we can account for the observations about the constraints that are in play as the conversation continues.

But this strategy just leads us back to the same dilemma. As noted, there are multiple options for how the conversation will continue after the mis-speaking. One of those options is for me to respond to the conventional content of the sentence actually uttered, and then my father and I might indeed continue our conversation talking about Alon, and making him the referent of uses of *he/him*. But if the Record were updated with the conventional content of sentence (5), then this conversation about Alon would be "off the record," putting us back in the problematic situation we discussed above.

4.2. Negotiating the Record

The following is a more-or-less faithful rendition of a conversation between my spouse, T., and another acquaintance, J., which took place in my hearing.

(6) [Context: Conversation took place outdoors in early February in Pittsburgh. The winter had been exceptionally mild. On the day of the conversation, the temperature had dropped noticeably lower, but was still much warmer than a typical Pittsburgh February. J. and T. have run into each other walking across the campus. Immediately prior to this conversation, T. had been complaining to me about being cold.]

J: How are you?

T: Cold.

J: [laughing], Yes, 40 degrees in February!

T: You're right, it's warm for the time of year. But I've been spoiled.

The conversation involved an interesting misunderstanding. When T. uttered *cold*, he meant the content of his utterance seriously. J., however, took him to be ironic, or humorous, and to be making indirect reference to the mild weather. (This conversation is thus similar to L&S's constructed (1), where the import of an utterance is mistaken by the addressee.) What is particularly interesting is T.'s final move. He first continues (almost) as if J.'s take on his original utterance were correct,

acknowledging the mild temperature. But then he goes on to explain his original utterance on its intended, serious, interpretation.

This was a complicated interaction, although compressed into a very brief conversational exchange. It suggests, though, that the Gricean picture where, as L&S put it, neither perspective is privileged, is the right one. Neither conventional content nor literal content nor intended content is guaranteed to be the content which drives update of the Record.

Similarly, I've been in more than one conversation where I recognize that I've been misunderstood in some mild, noncatastrophic way, and have simply allowed the conversation to shift to a different topic than the one I had actually introduced, or to discussion of a person I wasn't originally talking about. Here is a constructed example:

(7) [Context: A noisy children's birthday party; lots of kids running around. I am observing a mother of twins dealing with her two four year olds at the same time. The mother's name is Emily, which is also the name of the mother of the child having the birthday party. I address another parent, P.]

Me: I don't know how Emily manages it.

P: Yeah, I know, it's amazing, she always throws these fantastic birthday parties.

Me: Yeah, and she seems to enjoy it, too.

P's response indicates that she has mistaken the reference of my use of *Emily*, (hence also of *it*). But as I am just making conversation, I am just as happy to talk about *Emily*₂ as about *Emily*₁. According to L&S, the Record will reflect the grammatically determined update associated with my original utterance, where the reference of *Emily* is fixed by my basic intention to refer to *Emily*₁. And that should affect which uses of pronouns, and which conversational moves, are subsequently licensed. But any constraints on our continuing conversation seem to come, in fact, from the state of the Record which my interlocutor takes to be correct and which I subsequently adopt, in violation of what convention requires. The posited convention-driven Record is inert in this description of the exchange.

4.3. Conversational implicature on the Record?

One helpful feature of the L&S approach is that it provides a means of diagnosing what information is required to be on the Record. The Record is supposed to be what governs the appropriateness of

conversational moves; a conversational move is licensed if the information on the Record says it is. We can thus make observations about what moves are licensed in particular situations, and use these observations to understand how the Record has evolved.

Here I want to make a simple observation: there are cases where the appropriateness of a conversational move seems to be based on information derived inferentially from a prior utterance or from the utterance that constitutes the move in question. These observations suggest that information derived not from the conventionally determined content of utterances also goes on the Record.

First example:

- (8) a. A: Wanna go get lunch?
b. B: I have to finish this grading.
c. A: Oh well. Maybe next time.

A's utterance c. is conversationally coherent only if B's utterance is registered as declining the invitation issued at utterance a. But "I decline" is not part of the conventional content of B's utterance. So, we seem to have two choices: (i) Allow that the declining function of b.'s utterance is registered on the Record. (ii) Deny that the conversational coherence exhibited here is governed by features of the Conversational Record. But I think that to make move (ii) would be to undermine some of the rationale for the Record model.

The second example involves presupposition:

- (9) a. A: What did you think of the movie?
b. B: I liked the popcorn.
c. A: I see. Was it the anti-feminist theme that you hated?

On many standard views, A's second utterance, which contains an *it*-cleft, conventionally requires that the Record includes the information that B hated something (about the movie). It is clear how that information would get there; B, by failing to properly answer A's question, implicates this. But again, this required proposition is not the conventional content of any utterance. So if the Record is to govern the felicity of presuppositional utterances, then, it seems, it must reflect content inferentially introduced.

The final case involves the establishment of coherence relations. L&S take coherence relations between discourse units to be part of what is conventionally expressed by utterances. But sometimes, coherence between two discourse segments is due not to the conventional content of the uttered sentences, but to something inferable from that content. Consider the following case, which modifies an actual discourse segment taken from the Santa Barbara corpus:⁶

- (10) [Context: Speaker has just been talking about her parents taking trips to various places to go salmon fishing]
- a. They [speaker's parents] were supposed to go up to Oregon ... at the end of August
 - b. When they [salmon] usually run,
 - c. and,
 - d. fish weren't running this year.
 - e. They were really bummed.

Consider the relation that holds between the (invented) final segment e., and what precedes it. That utterance serves as a kind of conclusion of the preceding story. In particular, it describes the parents' feelings about a fact that is never actually stated, namely, that they were not able to go fishing. Segment d., in combination with the *supposed to go* of the first segment, allows us to make this inference, and hence allows us to see the final segment as cohering with the rest. If the coherence relation that attaches this utterance to the remainder of the discourse is to be reflected in the update of the conversational record; and if that requires a representation of what the utterance coheres *with*; then we seem compelled to have a representation on the record of material derived by inference.

For the sake of maximizing tendentiousness, I titled this section *Implicature on the Record*. The inferences I point to might be argued to be something other than implicature. But it seems undeniable that they are non-encoded inferences that the speaker invites the addressee to draw, and then utilizes in further conversational moves. Given L&S's strong position that inferences not grounded in linguistic rule have no role to play in update of the Record, the inferential status of the content is all that is necessary to raise a query about the view.

⁶ Modified from Transcript SBC003. The utterance up to d. is directly from the transcript. Utterance e. is invented.

4.4. Nonconventional forms

Some months ago, I got a voice mail from the school nurse at my son's school. The message started like this:

- (11) This is the school nurse calling from Minadeo. Not an emergency. I do have Isaac here in the nurse's office, he had fallen at lunch recess and **his elbow, he fell right on a bed of gravel** so umm some of the wounds are superficial... "[detailed description of the injury follows] (May 2015)

I want to focus on the part of the message in boldface: *his elbow, he fell right on a bed of gravel*. This sequence was uttered with normal clausal intonation, with a slight intonational break, such as would follow standard fronting, right after *elbow*. From this part of the utterance, I understood (correctly) that Isaac had fallen on a bed of gravel and scraped up his elbow. I think that the nurse, leaving the message, was taking it that she would thereby communicate that content to me. But there is no conventional rule for deriving that content from the sentence she uttered, which is not even, strictly speaking, grammatical. (Note that the phrase *his elbow* has no grammatical role in the sentence it is attached to.)

I do not think this is a case where we could plausibly say that the nurse was inventing or using an ad hoc convention that she intended me to participate in. This is somewhat like the case of mis-speaking discussed in section 3.1., in that we might say that the speaker *intended* to produce a grammatical sentence, so *intended* to contribute to the conversation the conventional content of a similar sounding sentence. But which sentence that would be I'm not sure. Perhaps what she had in mind was a sequence of sentences: *Isaac fell on the gravel. He scraped up his elbow on the gravel*. But if she'd really had that in mind, it seems unlikely that her basic intention would go so far astray.

It's worth noting that what the nurse actually said was an extremely compact and elegant way to communicate the slightly complex message she had in mind. It was a lovely and nonconventional use of the language to accomplish her communicative goal.

I suspect that a great deal of ordinary language use, which is after all full of false starts and incomplete sentences, is like this. Conventions of grammar and word meaning provide a framework, within which all kinds of creative use happens. But this kind of creative use is not metaphor, nor is it implicature. In this case, the nurse has a very definite message to convey, and that message was

straightforwardly retrievable from the form that she used. L&S's strictly conventionalist account seems to rule out updates to the Record that are so derived.

5. Conclusion

One of the goals that L&S set themselves is to distinguish between semantics and pragmatics, which they take to be two substantively distinguishable components involved in linguistic communication. I agree that there is such a substantive distinction, but I think that they are looking to characterize it in the wrong place. To put things in terms of their own picture (which in many ways I endorse): The distinction between semantics and pragmatics is a distinction in *how* speakers bring about changes to the Conversational Record. The semantics of a language is the set of linguistic rules (conventions) that govern the meaning contributions of morphemes and their combinations. Pragmatics is the set of further, non-language specific, procedures and practices that govern how language users map the products of semantics to the rich messages conveyed by speakers. But we don't find the traces of the semantics/pragmatics distinction in the Record that results.

If I may offer a metaphor: Think about a climber climbing up a rock face. To get to the top, she uses a variety of tactics. Sometimes she uses natural hand- and foot-holds provided by the rock. Sometimes she hammers in her own pegs. Maybe sometimes she uses a peg left by another climber. Often a single step will involve multiple strategies at once. To the person waiting at the top of the rock face, it's all the same: she made it to the top. Now, an expert might examine the details of her climb and observe all the different strategies she used, and when. But if the person at the top was just waiting for the climber to get there, what do they care?

I think communication is rather like that. Most of us are just talking. We want to get our message across; we want to get the messages of others. There is no reason why we should have a special sensitivity to the tools which others have used to convey their messages, any more than the person at the top of the cliff face cares about how their companion got there.

And it is only common sense to think that things would be this way. Language in general, and semantics in particular, does not arise in a vacuum. However language came to be, it came to be as a human artifact. It was created, and is daily re-created, by human beings, with human brains, human cognition, and human dispositions. Humans are creatures who reason, who infer, and who are uniquely sensitive to the intention driven behaviors of others. So how could language fail to be something which utilizes those particular skills of its designers? Moreover, language and its rules have evolved though

use, and use, always, happens in a rich context. By the same reasoning, then, it seems inevitable that human language has evolved so as to take advantage of this always-present resource.

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