

On semantic and pragmatic ambiguity*

Kresten Nordentoft in memoriam

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Abstract

The topic of this paper is an analysis of different realizations of indirect and ambiguous language usage. The paper starts out with a short survey of two varying concepts of direct and indirect communication, i.e. Grice's theory of *conversational implicature* and Kierkegaard's concept of *indirect communication*. Based on examples, different combinations of semantic and pragmatic unequivocality and ambiguity are described and explained, mainly by means of the above mentioned philosophers.

1. Introduction

Thirty years ago a lively debate took place in connection with a lecture on Logic and Conversation given by Paul Grice in 1967. The lecture was published in *Syntax and semantics* in 1975 and so became widely known. At that time the discussion was mainly concerned with Grice's maxims and the question of their relevance and explanatory force as a general description of communication between people. One purpose of this article is to discuss how far Grice's concept of implicature and inferences may be said to account for the ways in which ambiguous, 'marked' uses of language differ from the 'unmarked' elements which are included in the maxims.

Departures from the principle of 'pure' information in communication have, however, often given rise to interpretations, and this continues to be the case in modern linguistics. They may be theories related to indirect speech acts, to politeness, to ambiguity and vagueness, to metaphors and metonymy, to ritualistic use of language, to irony and sarcasm and also to more superior speculations of phatic communica-

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tion or face-work and so on. To discuss all of these would not be possible within the space of a single article, and perhaps of little interest to the reader. Although the problem is still of current interest, it is far from new. Even Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, warned against ambiguities: ambiguity should be avoided unless it is intentional.

2. Paul Grice: Logic and conversation

In his 1967 lecture Grice takes for granted the existence of a series of categories relating to rational behaviour and rational action: Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner. Grice himself refers to Kant.¹ But in actual fact these ideas are to be found much earlier, i.e. in the classical theory of categorization.² Grice does not derive the four categories from verbalization or conversation per se, but he makes the assumption that conversation is a variety of rational conduct. In Grice's work this leads to certain speculations as to how rules for efficient, meaningful, and unequivocal use of language can be formulated.

Grice assembles these rules so as to form what he calls 'the co-operative principle' (CP). The co-operative principle is the basis of communication. From it the four categories Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner can be derived, and each is related to a series of maxims:

Co-operative Principle

Categories: *Maxims*:

- Quantity: 1. Make your contribution as informative as is required.
 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
- Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true.
 1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
- Relations: Be relevant.
- Manner: Be perspicuous.
 1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
 2. Avoid ambiguity.
 3. Be brief.
 4. Be orderly.

The well-known maxims listed above specify what a participant must do in order to conduct a conversation effectively, rationally and co-operatively: s/he must speak

¹ Here he must be thinking of *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, § 9: Von der logischen Funktion des Verstandes in Urteilen and § 10: Von den reinen Verstandsbegriffen oder Kategorien, in which four categories are described as the true conceptions of pure intellect (Kant Werkausgabe, 1968: 119).

² They come originally from Aristotle's *Categories*, *Organon I.4*, in which Aristotle classifies the ten basic categories of words (Aristotle, 1963: 5). Aristotle expounds the concepts as follows: "Of things said without any combination, each signifies either substance or quantity or qualification or a relative or where or when or being-in-a-position or having or doing or being-affected" (Aristotle, 1963: 5).

informatively, truthfully, with relevance, clearly, and unequivocally. The co-operative principle can be seen as an unmarked, neutral framework for communication which follows the principle of ‘pure’ information.

There are, however, various responses to the categories and maxims. They can be adhered to, or they can be departed from in various ways, and it is these departures from the maxims that demand explanation. Failure to observe a maxim leads the person addressed (on the assumption that the exchange is conducted in general accordance with the CP) to consider that he must begin to interpret the communication. Grice calls this form of non-straightforward communication which requires interpretation, conversational implicature.

3. Ambiguity in Kierkegaard’s works

We encounter a completely different view of communication in the work of the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard’s philosophical and literary works, looked on as one collective undertaking, consist of two series of works: the ‘aesthetic’ writings and the religious writings. The ‘aesthetic’ writings are published under pseudonyms and characterized by an ambiguous and indirect style. The more ‘direct’ works on Christianity and religious faith are partly published under his own name. But ‘Christianity’, which is the message of his religious works, is still (for Kierkegaard) objective uncertainty, and (for his reader) an unstable pattern of meaning. Kierkegaard’s strategy and his rhetorical approach is to take the reader with him for part of the way, only to cast him adrift again into the 70,000 fathoms of deep blue sea, instead of bringing him safely into the harbour – to keep to Kierkegaard’s own metaphorical way of expression.³ Ambiguity, the inner contradiction in Kierkegaard’s own message, is present in the mutually dependent corrections of the pseudonymous writings and in the intentional ambiguity, which functions on several planes, one of which finds expressions in Kierkegaard’s own literary style, whose function is constantly to recall attention to the language itself, to lead his reader to reflect upon the act of signifying and upon the problematic nature of the communication itself. His linguistic means are departing from ordinary language usage and from conventional notions of meaning (e.g. in *Philosophical fragments*) or using startling and unexpected changes in his literary style (e.g. in *Diapsalmata* to *Either–or*), (Nordentoft, 1972: 445ff.; Mackey, 1986: 133ff.).

In *The point of view for my work as an author* (1848, published posthumously in 1858), which is Kierkegaard’s own interpretative survey of his literary output, he affirms that indirect, ambiguous language is the form of communication best suited for serious communication and to make the recipient aware and able to make his own choice – independently of Kierkegaard. And Kierkegaard’s use of pseudonyms in the publication of his aesthetic writings is to be seen from the same angle: “selv skjult i et Bedrag gaaer jeg ikke ligefrem tilværks men indirekte-underfundigt”

³ The interpretation of Søren Kierkegaard’s philosophy in this article is substantially based on the interpretations of Kierkegaard by Kresten Nordentoft, my former teacher.

(‘being myself hidden in a deceit, I do not proceed straightforwardly but indirectly-subtly’) (Kierkegaard, 1858, 1982, vol. 18: 134).⁴ Here, Kierkegaard acknowledges his intentional ‘deception’ of the reader:

“Hvad vil det saa sige at ‘bedrage’? Det vil sige, at man ikke begynder *ligefrem* med det man vil meddele, men begynder med at tage den Andens Indbildning for god Vare.” (Kierkegaard, 1852, 1982, vol. 18: 105)

‘What then does it mean, ‘to deceive’? It means that one does not begin *directly* with the matter one wants to communicate, but begins by accepting the other man’s illusion at face value.’ (cf. Lowrie, 1962: 40)

To deceive his reader out of self-deception, Kierkegaard starts by accepting his illusion at face value. The procedure of this strategy is first to get the attention of the reader and then force the reader into an option. This means that incongruity can arise e.g. between the communicator and the recipient and between the message and the recipient, who is supposed to be in delusion. The intention of the communication, then, is to create a challenge to the recipient’s unequivocal attitude to life, which first comes under attack with the assistance of the ambiguous alternative contained in the message, which also contains pointers towards a new self-realisation. The message, however, is not meant to influence the reader into following Kierkegaard’s path, but to force him to find his own.

“Tvinge et Menneske til en Mening, en Overbevisning, en Tro, det kan jeg i al evighed ikke; men Eet kan jeg (...) jeg kan tvinge ham til at blive opmærksom.

At dette er en Velgjerning, derom er ingen Tvivl; men det maa heller ikke glemmes, at det er et Vovestykke. Ved at tvinge ham til at blive opmærksom, naaer jeg at tvinge ham til at dømme. Nu dømmer han. Men hvad han dømmer, staaer ikke i min Magt. Maaskee dømmer han lige det Modsatte af hvad jeg ønsker.” (Kierkegaard, 1852, 1982, vol. 18: 101)

‘In all eternity it is impossible for me to compel a person to accept an opinion, a conviction, a faith; but one thing I can do: I can compel him to be aware. (...)

That this is a charitable act there can be no dispute, but it must not be forgotten that it is a daring venture. By obliging a man to become aware I achieve the aim of obliging him to judge. Now he judges. But how he judges is not under my control. Perhaps he judges in the very opposite sense to that which I desire’ (cf. Lowrie, 1962: 35).⁵

⁴ All references to and quotations from Kierkegaard are taken from the Danish edition of Kierkegaard’s collected works, 1982. The English quotations of *The point of view for my work as an author* are translated into English from this edition. I have consulted the translation by Walter Lowrie (1962), but I haven’t followed his translation whenever I felt that the meaning of the Danish Kierkegaard text wasn’t rendered clearly.

⁵ In the above quotations I have adapted Lowrie’s English translation to achieve a better correspondence with the Danish text.

So Kierkegaard's writings breach several of Grice's maxims. Moreover, it is questionable whether intentional deception of the reader can be said to fall within the framework of the principle of co-operation, since Kierkegaard assumes that he and his reader have, at first, no "common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction" (Grice, 1975: 45).

Nevertheless, the two perceptions of communication discussed here can be seen to have a minimal common denominator: there is a degree of agreement between Grice's conversational implicature and Kierkegaard's thesis concerning indirect and ambiguous communication, viz. *potential vagueness*, which creates a situation in which the recipient must interpret.

It is true that the status of the direct message as a 'basis of communication' is called in question by Kierkegaard, whose topic mainly is communication about existential questions. But direct, 'unmarked' communication is in a sense nevertheless the essential precondition for indirect communication (as a deviation from the 'unmarked' use of language) to obtain the intended effect upon the recipient.⁶

4. On semantic and pragmatic unequivocality and ambiguity

4.1. Semantic and pragmatic unequivocality

The question of unequivocality versus ambiguity can, however, be given a more explicit formulation. I shall not omit to point out that *semantic and pragmatic unequivocality* (cf. Fig. 1 below) is what we usually strive to achieve, especially when we are using Language for Specific Purposes. *Polysemy*, i.e. semantic ambiguity, is commonly regarded as a nuisance, for instance when it occurs in terminology. Polysemy arises when the relation between particular words and particular objects or situations is not unequivocal, unidentified, or vague. Beyond this strictly defined semantic ambiguity, a more broadly based linguistic ambiguity can be discussed: ambiguity as a fundamental and general element of natural language. In the following I shall refer to the latter category as *pragmatic ambiguity*.

If semantic and pragmatic unequivocality are combined with semantic and pragmatic ambiguity, the following four combinations arise:

1. semantic unequivocality–pragmatic unequivocality
2. semantic unequivocality–pragmatic ambiguity
3. semantic ambiguity–pragmatic unequivocality
4. semantic ambiguity–pragmatic ambiguity

Fig. 1.

⁶ This important aspect has been pointed out by my anonymous referee.

4.2. Semantic unequivocality–pragmatic ambiguity

The viewpoint in (2), semantic unequivocality combined with pragmatic ambiguity, appears in the introduction of Grice's 1967 lecture.

Grice commences his argument with this point that there are divergent meanings of logical understanding of, to take an example, the logical notation of *and* (\wedge), and its expression in natural language, in which *and* can have several elements of meaning additional to the formal notation.

In sentences (1)–(2) it is clear that *and* is being used in two different ways.

- (1) Charles is a schoolboy and Peter is an apprentice (*and* = \wedge)
 (2) He got into the car and started the engine (*and* = and + sequence in time)

In the first sentence *and* is used as \wedge : the order of the two statements can be reversed without changing the meaning of the sentence. This is not the case in the second sentence, in which *and* has the meaning 'and then/afterwards' and so contains the element of meaning signifying sequence in time.

According to Grice, this is not to be looked upon as a failing either of logic or of natural language; the divergency touches upon the error of not taking sufficient note of the circumstances which regulate natural language, which are that ambiguity is manifest in the use of language. That is to say, a stable logical-semantic kernel of meaning exists. In natural language, this kernel is overlaid by an unstable context-specific pragmatic meaning, which Grice denotes by the verb to implicate and the nouns implicature and implicatum ('that which is implied').

4.3 Semantic ambiguity–pragmatic unequivocality

It may be questioned whether Grice's hypothesis of a stable, logical-semantic kernel, overlaid by an unstable, pragmatic meaning, is a sufficient description of the matter. At this point it must be demonstrated that the opposite can also be the case, that is that a semantically ambiguous expression can be present in a pragmatic context which renders the expression unequivocal (3), and that most semantic ambiguities are resolved by context and situation without the user of the language being aware of them.

Eugenio Coseriu pursues this line of thought in his book on *Sprachkompetenz* (1988: 107–113). Coseriu begins his argument with the following question: Why does one (that is, a competent user of language) choose a particular interpretation from several possibilities?

Here is one of Coseriu's examples:

<i>ein Straßenhändler</i>	}	a person who sells or buys	}	<i>Straßen</i>
<i>ein Buchhändler</i>				<i>Bücher</i>

But we do not interpret *ein Straßenhändler* as a person who buys or sells streets because we do not know of such an occupation. Our knowledge of reality induces us

to interpret the expression as ‘a person who trades in the street’. However, we do not interpret *ein Buchhändler* as analogous with *ein Straßenhändler*, ‘one who buys and sells in a book’, because our knowledge of reality tells us that it is not possible.

The compound nouns *Straßenhändler* and *Buchhändler* express, rather, a more general meaning: ‘a person who conducts trade which has some relation to, respectively, streets or books’. What relationship there is between ‘trader’ and ‘street’ or ‘book’ has to do with our interpretation, which we establish on the basis of our knowledge and experience of reality.

This type of semantic ambiguity is quite common in compound nouns. The point Coseriu makes is that not only compound nouns, but also derivative forms contain much less and more uncertain meaning than is usually perceived. The phenomenon thus approaches what Aristotle designates ‘paronymy’ (that a word’s inflected forms mean several things, whose definitions are analogous to each other).

In Danish, *en løber* means: (1) a person who runs, (2) a long strip of carpeting, (3) a stretcher (in a row of bricks), (4) a chessman (bishop), (5) an insect; all of these derived from the Danish verb *at løbe* (to run).

Not only derivatives and compound nouns but numerous expressions in common use are characterized by their ambiguity. I saw ‘*Familien-Renntag*’ (lit. ‘family run-day’) on a poster outside the German town of Elmshorn (Schleswig-Holstein) early in the summer of 1996. Well now, who is going for a run? The family perhaps? But in that case the poster would be more likely to have ‘*Familien-Lauftag*’ written on it. As the poster was seen near the race course, we must assume that it targeted horse racing and the whole family were invited.

Another poster at a local road in Schleswig-Holstein showed the following text: *Pferdeboxen frei* (lit. ‘horse boxes/boxing free’). In this part of the world we have heard of cockfighting and dogfighting, down under boxing matches between kangaroos take place, but my personal North European experience and knowledge of reality tell me that this cannot mean free tickets for a boxing match between horses, but that it must refer to vacant stabling for horses.

The explanation is that these linguistic expressions have a certain degree of semantic ambiguity, but our experience and knowledge of reality (frames, contexts, etc.) make them more or less unequivocal.

How can we explain the fact that a competent user of language chooses one meaning from a number of possibilities? What is the experience and knowledge of reality that a competent speaker/hearer makes use of? We can refer to Wittgenstein’s theory of language games from *Philosophical investigations* (1953/1974: 10ff.) and to Stephen Levinson’s thoughts on ‘activity types and language’ (1992: 66ff.) to fathom what sort of experience and knowledge it is that determines and directs our interpretation of language.

As examples of the so-called language games Wittgenstein gives i.a.: making up a story, and reading it; guessing riddles; making a joke, telling it; asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.

Levinson gives a more explicit formulation of Wittgenstein’s thoughts on language games, pointing out that such descriptions impose fixed terms of reference both for the communicator and the recipient. These descriptions imply definite

expectations concerning thematic progression, rules of precedence, form and expected result as well as limitations regarding contents and themes.

Levinson describes the category as vague or fuzzy because the activities are to be found within a scale containing several variables: on the one hand, an activity prepared in advance in accordance with a particular manuscript or ritual; on the other, an unprepared-for incident with no script as, for example, a chance meeting of two people in a street. What is common to the type of activity is that the structural elements are all adapted to the overriding purpose of the activity that is to say the function or functions which the parties to the activity think it should have.

The fact that particular activities have structural characteristics means, for the communicator, that there are limitations as to the verbal contributions which are ‘appropriate’ to the activity. It also means that there is a corresponding framework regulating what the parties involved expect to hear and to achieve.

This, then, means that every type of activity or language game possesses a corresponding inferential framework, i.e. specific expectations as to the function which a specific expression fulfills in a specific context. This context, then, also delimits our interpretation, so as to obviate the possibility of semantic ambiguity.

4.4. *Semantic ambiguity–pragmatic ambiguity*

Our cultural tradition is full of myths, riddles, ambiguous questions, prophecies and interpretations of dreams, which are both semantically and pragmatically ambiguous (4).

‘An oracular reply’ has come into our vocabulary as a synonym for ambiguous wisdom. In many cases the oracles’ replies were so ambiguous that at least two interpretations were possible. A famous example is the answer of the Delphic Oracle to Croesus: “Κροῖσος Ἄλυν διαβάς μεγάλην ἀρχὴν καταλύσει” (‘Croesus, if he crosses the Halys, will bring about the fall of a mighty kingdom’, Aristotle: *Rhetoric*).

From Nordic mythology, Scandinavians are familiar with the story of Thor’s journey to Udgaard, where he is completely taken in by the giants, because in Udgaard everything is ambiguous, something other than what it appears to be. The old nurse, called ‘El’ with whom Thor fights and to whom he loses, turns out to be ‘Age’; the man ‘Hu’, with whom his boy must race, is ‘Thought’, the hungry man ‘Lu’, with whom Thor’s companion Loke must eat in competition is ‘Fire’, the drinking horn, which Thor must drain, has got its bottom in the sea, and so on. Hence, appellations and designations of persons and objects are ambiguous. The explanation here is that ambiguous language reflects an ambiguous world, a world in which events take place on several planes at one and the same time and where things are something other than what they appear to be. The ability to comprehend and interpret ambiguities and act in accordance with such interpretation is seen in our cultural tradition as a sign of intelligence or as characteristic of a singularly favoured and chosen person (e.g. Joseph who interprets Pharaoh’s dream of the seven fat years and the seven lean years (Gen. 41:17–36)). This ability to interpret ambiguous sayings is an important part of what may be described as ‘cultural competence’.

An example of how the competence to handle ambiguities is directly made a topic of learning is classical Athens. Here the comprehension of ambiguities had a vital role in the communicative culture (Weber, 1996: 315). In order to hold one's own in Athenian democracy it was necessary to be practiced in rhetoric and dialectic. In *Topics*, Aristotle devises procedures to enable one to spy out ambiguities, gives advice on how to handle them in argument, and scrutinizes the false conclusions that they give rise to.

I shall now analyze a single example in order to illustrate thesis 4.4.

The following example is a conversation, but not one which complies with the strict demand for empirical verifiability in conversational analysis. It was not recorded on tape or video, and indeed there is doubt as to whether the conversation ever took place in the manner in which it has been preserved, and it is improbable that any of the four people who wrote down the conversation was present when it took place.

The occasion is the questioning of Jesus by Pontius Pilate before sentence was passed. It took place towards the end of the period we call Hellenistic, in which the language of educated people in the Eastern Mediterranean region still was Greek. For that reason the earliest (still existing) source was written in Greek.⁷ For the purpose of this article, I confine my discussion to the three gospels of St Matthew, St Mark and St Luke, the so-called synoptic gospels.

Let us examine the Greek and Latin texts in the gospels:

σὺ εἶ ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων; ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἔφη· σὺ λέγεις. (Matth. 27, 11)
Tu es Rex Iudaeorum? Dicit illi Iesus: Tu dicis. (Matth. 27, 11)

σὺ εἶ ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων; ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς αὐτῷ λέγει· σὺ λέγεις.
(Mark. 15,2)
Tu es rex Iudaeorum? At ille respondens, ait illi: Tu dicis. (Mark. 15, 2)

σὺ εἶ ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων; ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς αὐτῷ ἔφη· σὺ λέγεις. (Luk. 23, 3)
Tu es rex Iudaeorum? At ille respondens ait: Tu dicis (Luk. 23, 3)

The question I wish to ask at this point is – how are we to understand the words σὺ λέγεις – *tu dicis*? Are they a negation or an affirmation of Pontius Pilate's question? Do they mean 'that is merely something you postulate' or 'you have said that, not I, but since you say it, must it not be correct?'⁸

⁷ Based on the method of retranslation, the thesis has been put forth that the gospel of St Matthew almost certainly originally has been written in Aramaic.

⁸ The account in the gospel according to St John (18:37) differs in some respects from the other three gospels. Here, the account is more directly pointed toward a confirmation:

(i) εἶπεν οὖν αὐτῷ ὁ Πιλάτος· οὐκοῦν βασιλεὺς εἶ σύ; ἀπεκρίθη [ὁ] Ἰησοῦς· σὺ λέγεις ὅτι Βασιλεὺς εἰμι. (Joh. 18, 37)

(ii) Dixit itaque ei Pilatus: Ergo rex es tu? Respondit Iesus: Tu dicis quia rex sum ego (Joh. 18, 37)

The reason why I took particular notice of this episode in The New Testament was an interview on German television (ZDF) with Chaim Cohen, Israel's former minister of justice, at Easter 1996, during which he commented on that perilous point in the gospels which has been the basis of anti-Semitism on religious grounds for nearly two thousand years. Chaim Cohen's argument made the claim that it was not the Jews who condemned Jesus for blasphemy in a religious trial, but the Romans who condemned him to death in a political trial because, by declaring himself to be 'King of the Jews', he had instituted a rebellion against the authority of the Roman State.

Cohen proceeded to interpret the meaning of the Vulgate reading 'tu dicis'. His argument was: Jesus did not deny that he was King of the Jews. Cohen expounded 'tu dicis' as meaning 'das hast du gesagt, nicht ich'. At this point, the philologist in me began to protest: Let us assume that Pilate's mother tongue was Latin, and that the words of Jesus had been translated for him from Aramaic or Hebrew into the Latin 'tu dicis'. But what of that? Perhaps the exchange was conducted in Greek and there was no question of translation into Latin. We do not know.

At this point, we must take note of two things: (1) that Latin in about 35 A.D. was post-classical Latin, which (still) had no expression answering to our present-day particles 'yes' or 'no', but in their stead used adverbs such as 'ita', 'etiam' or generally repeated the questioning verb such as 'sum' or 'dixi' in affirmations, and *non* or a prefix (e.g. *ab*) plus verb in negations. But (2) neither in Greek nor in Latin was it necessary at that time to use a pronoun (later Latin, however, prefers the pronoun). Jesus could therefore have used simply λέγεις – *dicis*.

In contrast to Chaim Cohen, I do not think that it is in any way possible for us to make a re-recording of the trial in the sense of removing the ambiguity from the words, or that we can make use of the original text for that purpose: We do not know which language was spoken (Aramaic, Latin, or Greek). We do not know the exact linguistic co-text, or the context of situation. We do not perceive the paralinguistic and non-verbal features or the prosodic – all situational elements which for the contemporary listener might have contributed to obviate the ambiguity of the words spoken. In theological writings, there are conflicting interpretations, but I believe that the pragmatic linguistic point is clear: this utterance is, and can only be, ambiguous.

5. Implicature

What result would we come to if we used Grice's theory on this example?

A communicator can observe the maxims but he can also violate or exploit them in various ways: a communicator can say things which are breaches of one or a number of the maxims. For example, he can violate maxim 1 under the heading of Quantity by being less informative than is necessary. When this is the case, the recipient, the person addressed, will continue to assume that the communicator is adhering to the principle of co-operation, and attempt to find an interpretation of the infringement which makes it possible for the recipient to retain his perception of the

communicator as co-operating. In other words, the recipient must interpret the communicator's communicative intentions beyond the logical meaning of what has been 'said'. The recipient must then assume that there is a meaning supplementary to the literal meaning of what the communicator says, which is the implicature.

The communicator, then, by obviously breaching one of the maxims, can compel the recipient to draw a series of inferences.

An important feature of implicature is that the recipient is able to account for the implicatures in a rational manner. But the point here is that an expression with one meaning in different situations and contexts can evoke different implicatures. This means that it may not be possible to make an exact determination of the quantity of implicatures present in a single case. The consequence of this is that the recipient can never be ultimately certain about what the communicator of an expression means by it. The recipient's inferences can in no way be an absolute rendering of what the communicator means.

If we apply this consideration to the scene we are discussing, we can say that *σὺ λέγεις* or *tu dicis* can imply 'you are right' or 'that is merely something you postulate'. But we can draw no final conclusion as to what Jesus meant by it.

This reasoning, which I have extracted from Grice's theory of implicature and inference, is in many ways reminiscent of what Søren Kierkegaard calls 'the impossibility of direct communication'.

6. The impossibility of direct communication

In *The Practice in Christianity No II* (1850), Søren Kierkegaard affirms the theory of ambiguity, saying in fact that direct communication is an impossibility, when the communicator is himself marked by contradiction, as here in the contradictory qualities of being God and being an individual human being. Kierkegaard writes, controversially, that because 'people' (read: the Church, the Clergy) have done away with Christ and made doctrine the prime element, 'they' imagine that the whole of Christianity consists of direct information (Kierkegaard, 1850: 121).

But what has Kierkegaard's falling out with the Church and the Clergy to do with the problem of unequivocality versus ambiguity? Kierkegaard's reasoning goes as follows.

Unlike direct communication, indirect communication can be defined as a message which contains a contradiction on one or several planes, in this case an inner paradox within the communicator. The God-Man (Jesus) is, says Kierkegaard, a sign of contradiction (St Luke 2:34), being at the same time God and Man. And as every sign is a kind of message, the sign of contradiction is a message which contains a contradiction in its composition. Kierkegaard gives the following example:

"En Meddelelse, der er Enheden af Spøg og Alvor, er saaledes et Modsigelsens Tegn. Den er ingen ligefrem Meddelelse, det er umuligt for Modtageren at sige *ligefrem*, hvilket der er hvilket, just fordi Meddeleren ikke *ligefrem* meddeler enten Spøg eller Alvor. Alvoren i Forhold til denne Meddelelse, ligger derfor på et andet Sted,

ligger i at gøre Modtageren selvvirksom – rent dialektisk forstaaet den højeste Alvor i Forhold til en Meddelelse.” (Kierkegaard, 1850: 123)⁹

‘A communication that is the unity of jest and earnestness is thus a sign of contradiction. It is no *direct* communication; it is impossible for the recipient to *say directly* which is which, simply because the one communicating does not *directly* communicate either jest or earnestness. Therefore the earnestness in this communication lies in another place, or somewhere else, lies in making the recipient self-active – in purely dialectic terms the highest earnestness with regard to communication.’ (cf. Hong, 1991: 125)

However, continues Kierkegaard, the combination of jest and earnest in the message marking it as contradictory must not be madness, for then there will be no message. In other words, there must be method in the madness. The contradictory parts must not annul each other in such a way that the sign comes to mean nothing, or in such a way that it becomes the opposite of a sign, a concealment. If, on the other hand, either the jest or earnestness is completely dominant, then what we have is direct, unambiguous communication.

The relationship between Kierkegaard’s pronouncement on direct communication and on communication marked as contradictory, and Grice’s theory of implicature, is unmistakable. The extract from Kierkegaard quoted above is, in fact, Grice’s theory in a nutshell. The maxims which Grice lists under the ‘principle of co-operation’ resemble what Kierkegaard says about direct communication, and his theory of implicature has a striking likeness to what Kierkegaard describes as ‘communication marked by contradiction’; making the recipient activate himself is precisely what is contained in the inferences discussed above.

At a later point Kierkegaard describes those two forms of communication in more detail. Kierkegaard calls direct communication *didacticizing*.

“Ogsaa den ligefremme Meddelelse søger maaskee at gjøre Modtageren opmærksom, saa godt den kan: den beder, den besværges ham, den lægger ham Sagens Vigtighed ret paa Hjerte, formaner, truer o.s.v – det er Alt igjen ligefrem Meddelelse, og derfor er der hverken Alvor nok i Forhold til den høieste Afgjørelse, ei heller vindes der Opmærksomhed nok.” (Kierkegaard, 1850: 136)

‘Direct communication perhaps also seeks to make the recipient aware as well as it can: it pleads and implores him, it lays the importance of the cause right to his heart, it admonishes, it threatens, and so on – this is all direct communication again, and therefore there is neither sufficient earnestness with regard to the supreme decision nor is sufficient awareness gained.’ (cf. Hong, 1991: 140)

⁹ The Danish references and quotation from Kierkegaard are taken from the Danish edition of Kierkegaard’s collected works, *Samlede Værker* 1982, vol. 16. *Indøvelse i Christendom*. For the English quotations I have consulted Søren Kierkegaard: *Practice in Christianity*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (1991).

Direct, unambiguous communication, which ‘pleads, admonishes, threatens’ is not serious communication, according to Kierkegaard. And above all: it is not an effective method of communicating: It does not ‘make aware’, and conversion only comes gradually in the course of didacticizing.

Ambiguous, indirect communication, which admittedly bears the possibility of giving offense (we can say, of passive misunderstanding), but which challenges the recipient in an altogether different way, demands faith, says Kierkegaard, and:

“(…) Troen er selv en dialektisk Bestemmelse. Tro er et Valg, ingenlunde den ligefremme Modtagelse – og Modtageren er den, der bliver aabenbar, om han vil troe eller forarges.” (Kierkegaard, 1850: 136)

‘(...) faith itself is a dialectical qualification. Faith is a choice, certainly not direct reception – and the recipient is the one who is disclosed, whether he will believe or be offended.’ (cf. Hong, 1991:141)

Kierkegaard compares indirect, ambiguous communication to a mirror, set up facing a man:

“Det er en Gaade, men idet han gjetter, bliver det aabenbart, hvad der boer i ham, ved hvorledes han gjetter. Modsigelsen sætter ham i et Valg, og idet, samt i Det, han vælger, bliver han selv aabenbar.” (Kierkegaard, 1850: 124)

‘It is a riddle, but as he is guessing [the riddle], what dwells within him is disclosed by the way he guesses. The contradiction confronts him with a choice, and as he is choosing, together with what he chooses, he himself is disclosed.’ (cf. Hong, 1991: 127)

Here Kierkegaard’s thoughts contain an important point in relation to Grice, viz.: When the message is ambiguous, says Kierkegaard, ‘faith is required’, and the sign of contradiction ‘discloses the thoughts of hearts’ (Kierkegaard, 1850: 124). So it confronts the recipient with a revealing choice.

We can express this in another way. When communication is ambiguous, the focus is moved from the message proper to the recipient (does the recipient believe the message?). In other words, in direct, unambiguous communication, *the focus is on the message itself*. With indirect, non-straightforward and ambiguous communication, according to Kierkegaard, it is the credibility of the message and the faith of the recipient in the message that are focused on. At the same time Kierkegaard underlines the recipient’s active freedom to ‘choose’ his own interpretation.

7. Was Kierkegaard a modern philosopher of communication?

It is, perhaps, a somewhat bold undertaking to compare readings of Kierkegaard and Grice in this way? Both yes and no. *Yes*, because there is a distance between

Kierkegaard and the logical linguistic philosophy of Grice. And *no*, because the question how to deal with indirect communication is a fundamental problem in relation to language and communication (what Kierkegaard calls ‘the art of communication’).

However, Kierkegaard and Grice start from quite different positions. Grice makes unequivocal, clear, information the unmarked basic form of communication, and sees implicature and ambiguity as a breach or departure from the maxims of the principles of co-operation. It is clear that Grice adopts the viewpoint of rationality and logic in this matter.

Kierkegaard, on the contrary, considers this form of unequivocal message to be trivial, unimportant didacticizing, which does not take the recipient seriously, as it neither activates him nor gives him the freedom to make his own choice.

These diverse starting points explain why Kierkegaard’s and Grice’s pronouncements are very different. Kierkegaard’s interest lies in bringing the message of religious faith to the individual (‘hiin Enkelte’), and so he gives first place to the indirect message which demands faith. Grice’s position is that of a rational linguistic philosopher, whose starting point is the function of exchanging information between people. This explains the very different approach to a question of linguistic philosophy on which Kierkegaard and Grice are nevertheless basically in agreement.

Ambiguity, the indirect mode of communication, is – and will always be – an important aspect of our language, for common language must be flexible, nuanced and allow for communication which creates a relationship. To strive for complete unequivocality is necessary in technical or legal language, where the content of the message is the only important factor, or in situations in which regard for the relationship between communicator and recipient can be subordinated to the requirement of clear, unambiguous communication.

In most cases of semantic ambiguity, the person, whom Coseriu (1988) calls ‘the competent user of language’, will be able to disentangle the ambiguity and decode an expression from its context and from an awareness of the language games which are being invoked. Moreover, we are accustomed in our cultural tradition to what might be called ‘serious’ existential communication being conveyed not by straightforward messages or lecturing, but by what are in part extremely ambiguous messages focusing on the recipient’s interpretation.

Direct communication is the use of verbal signs in order to refer to concepts or things with which the communicator and the recipient are already acquainted or may become familiar. This intended informative, unequivocal usage of language presupposes cooperation in Grice’s sense, and on the part of both communicator and recipient a common purpose and a common knowledge of a referent signed by language. Communication, meaning, and interpretation tend to coincide. Indirect communication (so in Kierkegaard’s own writings) is conveyed by verbal signifiers that tend to obstruct immediate and unambiguous reference and postpone meaning, leaving the interpretation of the signifiers and the creation of meaning to the recipient.

Paradoxically, it is Kierkegaard who in his own way is a more modern ‘theorist’ on communication than is Grice: Kierkegaard is in fact mindful of the dialectic and reciprocity between the sign and its reader, a way of thinking which has been reaccentuated by semiotics in this century. The key to Kierkegaard’s idea of what con-

stitutes communication lies in his insistence that ‘recipient’ is an active word (Nordentoft, 1977: 34). Kierkegaard as communicator sets out *uden Myndighed at gøre opmærksom* (‘to make aware without exerting authority’) (Kierkegaard, 1851/1982, bd. 18: 69). The decision, the interpretation of the sign, the personal understanding, and the meaning are deliberately left to the recipient himself.

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