

WHEN LANGUAGE BREAKS

A HEIDEGGERIAN ANALYSIS OF GRICE'S COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE



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ABSTRACT: In “Logic and Conversation,” H. P. Grice posits that in conversations, we are “always-already” implying certain things about the subjects of our words while abiding by certain rules to aid in understanding. It is my view, however, that Grice’s so-called “cooperative principle” can be analyzed under the traditional Heideggerian dichotomy of ready-to-hand and present-at-hand wherein language can be viewed as a “mere” tool that sometimes breaks. Ultimately, I contend that the likening of language to a tool allows for a more robust understanding of it and conversational failures, while ontologically recategorizing language as an object of sorts.

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INTRODUCTION

In the following paper, I will attempt to analyze our usage of language and subsequently rethink the ontology of it by utilizing H. P. Grice's work on conversational implicature and Martin Heidegger's famous tool-analysis. Specifically, I will utilize Grice's account of conversational implicature in "Logic and Conversation" and Heidegger's account of the broken tool in *Being and Time* to make the case that our use of language can be understood under the traditional Heideggerian dichotomy of ready-to-hand/present-at-hand.¹ Indeed, it is my contention that Heidegger's tool-analysis has implications far beyond understanding *Dasein's* usage of what are traditionally considered "tools." In what follows, I will argue that when people engage in conversation and nothing "goes wrong," their relationship with language is one of readiness-to-hand. Conversely, when one (or more) maxims of the Gricean cooperative principle are flouted—that is to say, something "goes wrong"—the language being used becomes foregrounded, and we thus enter a present-at-hand relationship with it. Understanding language as a tool, in the Heideggerian sense, allows us not only to examine the ways in which language works, but also to create an ontological parallel between "tools" and conceptual apparatuses that ultimately helps us flatten ontology and rethink the existential status of objects.

GRICE AND CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE

In "Logic and Conversation," H. P. Grice makes the case that when humans engage in everyday discursive interactions, they are abiding by an implicit and assumed set of rules governing how they ought to talk to and understand one another. For Grice, the so-called "cooperative principle" is implicitly invoked in conversations as a tool to allow humans to make sense of

1 H. P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *The Philosophy of Language*, ed. A. P. Martinich and David Sosa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

2 Grice, "Logic and Conversation," 314.

3 Grice, "Logic and Conversation," 314-15.

4 Grice, "Logic and Conversation," 313.

what the other person is saying without requiring constant clarification.² Indeed, according to Grice, as we talk we tend to abide by certain maxims that help make sure that what we are saying is clear and distinct. Specifically, Grice isolates four fundamental categories under which various maxims fall: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. Under the category of quantity, Grice argues that there are two vital maxims: be as informative as possible and do not provide too much information. For quality, the maxims are that one ought not utter something that one believes to be false and that one ought not state things for which one lacks evidence. For relation, the obvious maxim is to be relevant. And, finally, for manner, the four maxims are as follows: avoid obscurity, avoid ambiguity, be brief, and be orderly.³ For Grice, not only do the aforementioned categories and maxims structure how humans use language, but following them—and, indeed, flouting them in strategic instances—is vital to the project of discourse. Specifically, when one abides by the maxims, *ceteris paribus*, the semantic content of a sentence is taken at face value. That is to say, when the maxims are followed within the context of the overall conversation, statements such as "I am lost" and "here is a map" are interpreted literally. When at least one maxim is flouted, however, the meaning of the sentence changes, and thus it cannot be taken at face value.

To explore what Grice means, let us deconstruct a hypothetical conversation. Let us, for the sake of argument, say that Jane sees John's car on the shoulder of a highway. If Jane asked what happened, John would typically report what he took to be the relevant facts in a non-florid manner. For Grice, most of our conversations follow this same theme. That being said, however, conversations do either intentionally or unintentionally go awry, and thus conversational implicature—that is to say, an unexpressed implication behind our words—comes into play. Allow me to take one of Grice's examples and run with it. Suppose A and B are talking about a mutual friend, C, who recently got a new job. A asks B, "How does C like her new job?" To this query, B responds, "She likes it, her co-workers, and hasn't been to prison yet."⁴ Upon hearing such a conversation, we are inclined to think that something funny is going on as an unrelated topic—that is to say, prison—was brought up out of nowhere. When one or more maxims

of the cooperative principle (in this case, the maxim of “be relevant”) are flouted, it becomes clear to us that something is being implied by the sentence and that the strict semantic content is not all there is; what Grice calls “conversational implicature” comes into play here. In the case of C, her psychology, for example, is implicated and brought forward insofar as we, as on-lookers, now begin to question whether C is prone to behavior that is likely to get her sent to prison, has had previous issues with co-workers, etc. Our understanding of the conversation shifts from the mere semantic content of the words uttered by A and B to a ghostly phantasm hovering behind the conversation. We no longer look to the meaning of the specific words to guide our quest for understanding, but rather we try to parse the words used to understand what implications they may hold and what those implications tell us about the subject of the sentence.

What this means for Grice is that language is used in at least two different ways: the first is a strictly semantic way, and the second is a way where facts about the subject of the sentence are implied. In the former, our use of language is of second nature. That is to say, during conversations we do not focus on language *as such*, rather we just use it without thinking about the rules that govern language. In the latter, our use of language is foregrounded; we suddenly notice semantic oddities in our discourse, and we are forced to think about what we *mean* when we say certain things and whether the words we hear have a hidden meaning behind them. In the case of a conversation where one or more maxims of the cooperative principle are flouted, we enter a moment of confusion where language breaks down and our conversations must be reconstructed. In this sense, the flouting of various maxims of the cooperative principle behave, as we shall see, like broken tools. To better understand the ontology of broken tools, we must turn to Martin Heidegger’s famous tool-analysis.

HEIDEGGER AND THE BROKEN HAMMER

In Heidegger’s discussion of entities encountered in the world—which is explored in his magnum opus, *Being and Time*—he takes note of a peculiar feature of the

way *Dasein* interact with objects in the world. For our purposes, we will understand *Dasein* to mean ‘humans’ and shall use the two interchangeably (much to the chagrin of Heidegger scholars). For Heidegger, we do not typically interact with entities on a cognitive level, but rather we interact with them in a subterranean and primordial fashion.⁵ In other words, when we utilize objects, we tend not to focus on the object *as such* as we are using it, but instead simply use the object for a given end, thereby causing the object to recede from view. When using a hammer to nail shingles onto a house, for example, we do not notice the hammer as we are striking the nail; rather the hammer withdraws from our cognition and exists in a state of what Heidegger calls “readiness-to-hand” wherein we rely upon a network of different objects all working together to achieve our goals.⁶ When the object we are using malfunctions in some way, however, our relationship suddenly changes. We begin to stare at the broken tool, thus bringing it to the forefront of our cognition, where we grasp it differently. In contrast to readiness-to-hand, the broken object is grasped “thematically” and “discovered” as a tool for doing work that was formerly tacitly relied upon. This shift from readiness-to-hand to un-readiness-to-hand underscores what Heidegger calls “present-at-handness,” or a conscious attending to objects.⁷ In a word, as Graham Harman notes, “Heidegger contends that our primary way of dealing with things is *absence*.”⁸

This feature of *Dasein*’s usage of tools—the fact that as we use them, they recede away from active cognition and into a world of subterranean relations—is of vital importance for understanding how humans live in the world. Furthermore, Heidegger’s tool-analysis does not just apply to “tools” as they are typically understood—that is to say as low-tech hardware used to complete a certain goal—but rather applies to all objects.⁹ Indeed, as I sit here and type this, I am silently relying upon my heart to continue beating, my alveoli to facilitate the exchange of oxygen from the air to my bloodstream, the floor upon which my chair sits to sustain my meager weight, etc. A “tool,” as understood from a Heideggerian perspective, is something far beyond simple, low-tech hardware but includes all objects upon which humans rely.

⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 97-98.

⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 97-98.

⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 102-03.

⁸ Graham Harman, “The Return to Metaphysics (2011),” in *Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2013), 15.

⁹ Graham Harman, “Technology, Objects and Things in Heidegger,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34, no. 1 (January 2010): 17, doi:10.1093/cje/bep021.

While the view that Heidegger's tool-analysis applies to a large swath of objects is more or less accepted, I want to take the analysis a bit further. Indeed, it is my contention that Heidegger's tool-analysis applies not only to the physical objects upon which humans rely but also to conceptual apparatuses, such as the language that humans use when navigating the world. In light of this, I will attempt to argue, using a Gricean understanding of conversational implicature, that there is no ontological difference in kind between language as a tool and, say, a hammer as a tool. Given that, we must turn now to a discussion of what language looks like when it breaks.

WHEN LANGUAGE BREAKS

While there is no shortage of explanations about *how* language works, the question of what language *is* seems to be too large to tackle.¹⁰ It is my contention that despite the nuances of how, say, sense and reference work or what definite descriptions pick out, language is, at base, a tool (that is to say, an object) like any of the others described above; we utilize it, we rely upon it, we neglect it, it recedes from view, and sometimes it malfunctions. Indeed, much like the hammer one uses to nail shingles into a roof, language can be used to complete various tasks. For example, if one wants a book retrieved from another room, one can utilize imperative or interrogative statements to ideally get a friend to fetch the book. What is more interesting, however, is that, for the most part, we can be remarkably imprecise in our usage of language and still accomplish our desired goals. Expanding upon the previous example, let us say that the book in question is located upon a couch, but you mistakenly think that the book is on a table. When you ask your friend, "Would you mind grabbing the book on the table for me?" despite being imprecise in your usage of language insofar as there is, in fact, no book on the table, more often than not your friend will return with the book. The fact that we can be imprecise in our usage of language and still net positive results is remarkable and requiring of (sometimes very complex) explanation. Understanding language under a Heideggerian tool framework, however, allows us to sidestep sticky conversations about how various features of language work and note something different. If we view language as a tool, we can bracket some of the theoretical

10 Martinich and Sosa, *The Philosophy of Language*.

discussions about *how* language works and examine *the ways in which* it works. Indeed, viewing language as a tool allows us to note that under normal conditions—that is to say, where conversational maxims are not flouted—language is ready-to-hand insofar as we do not notice the nuances of our words; rather we simply *use* language while the contours (similar to the contours of a hammer) recede out of view. Unless we are way off in our usage of language, we can be relatively inaccurate in what we are saying and still get the job done, as our usage of language is effectively second nature.

Successes of language are only marginally interesting, however. What is more interesting is when language acts like a hammer with a weak head and breaks. While the breakage of language is certainly not as dramatic as a hammer shattering when a person strikes it against a nail, it is nevertheless as important and unique in its own way. Language breaks not when we use the wrong word or accidentally engage in a social *faux pas*—if that were the case, we would not be able to be as imprecise as we are in our usage—but rather when we knowingly or unknowingly flout maxims of the cooperative principle in our conversations with other people. To examine a way in which language breaks, let us revive our individuals from above: Jane and John. If we recall, John's car was broken down on the shoulder of a highway and Jane asked what happened. In answer to her query, Jane received a response that was relevant, contained the facts of the situation, and was not overly florid. For example, she might have received the following reply: "My engine is out of oil." This regular usage of language would likely lead to Jane offering some form of assistance to John, be it a ride, a loan, or some other plausible action.

Let us imagine the same situation with Jane's same query, but instead suppose that John gives the following answer in response: "I passed a restaurant a few miles back." John's answer to Jane's query is odd and would not typically be expected. Indeed, John's answer is likely to *not* elicit the same response from Jane (namely, her offering to help). Rather, Jane is likely to be taken aback and, if she is more patient than most folks who would simply drive away, ask, "What?" In this scenario, language as a tool breaks and the semantic content of the words is not what is most important. Where, in the former

situation, Jane could know nothing about the mechanics of internal combustion engines and John's comment of "my engine is out of oil" could pass completely above her head, it would not have to affect her offer to help. In the latter situation, John's usage of language becomes foregrounded and subject to scrutiny. Why did John say "I passed a restaurant a few miles back?" Is that somehow relevant to his current predicament? Should Jane call the authorities to investigate the restaurant for misdeeds? The conversation becomes tumultuous and must be examined. If one takes seriously the Gricean understanding of conversational implicature, while all the above are possible, one must make a judgement about what is being implied; in this case, it would seem to be that John is asking Jane to go out to eat with him so that he can tell her the story of his car troubles (hardly an intuitive use of language and a very roundabout way of getting a date). Indeed, when John flouts a maxim of the cooperative principle and breaks language, causing the use of it to become foregrounded, language takes on an ontological status similar to that of the broken hammer and becomes present-to-hand. We no longer tacitly rely upon it, but instead we come to view it thematically.

Understanding language as a tool in the Heideggerian sense—that is to say, an object that can break and become foreground in Dasein's consciousness—allows, as we have seen, for a more robust understanding of different ways in which language works. What is more important, however, are the ontological implications of viewing language as a tool akin to a hammer. Where conventional ontological analyses would view a hammer and language as being radically different in kind—indeed, one might even contend that one is "more real" than another—applying a Heideggerian framework to language and making sense of language (a particular instance of a universal conceptual apparatus) allows for an ontological shift to occur wherein the Being of the tool and language differs not in kind but in degree (if at all). This ontological shift helps lead to what Levi Bryant calls a "flat ontology" where different objects, be they physical tools, ideas, or conceptual apparatuses, are viewed as existing equally and being worthy of consideration.¹¹ In other words, the flat, ontological shift allows us to maintain the position that a hammer is no more real than the language that we use to describe the hammer and that neither one is reducible

¹¹ Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, New Metaphysics (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2011) 245-90.

¹² Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, Or What It's Like to Be A Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

¹³ I thank Dr. Ney for bringing this issue to bear at the 2017 Steven Humphrey Undergraduate Philosophy Colloquium.

to the other. The ultimate implication of this—one that stretches far beyond language and, indeed, far beyond the purview of this paper—is that we are now able to make sense both of how non-physical objects exist and how they are utilized, leading directly into Ian Bogost's examination of "alien phenomenology," a phenomenology where we can try to make sense of the existence and "experiences" of non-human *things*.¹² While a different topic indeed, the flattening of ontology that occurs via a Heideggerian analysis of language is one of the many routes that leads into a revision of ontology and can ultimately provoke a rethinking of the existential status of "things."

NEY'S INTRA-EXTRA OBJECTION

The linguistic theory above—what may be called the "tool-theory" of language—has its limits, and while it would be impossible for me to cover every possible objection and extenuating circumstance, it is prudent nevertheless to examine the most salient objection: one put forth by Alyssa Ney, an associate professor at the University of California Davis' Department of Philosophy who works primarily in metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of physics. Ney, who I am indebted to for raising this issue, asked me (and I summarize her words) the following: what are we to make of instances where all parties of a given conversation are privy to information outsiders are not?¹³ To be more specific, the above analysis has taken the form of a disinterested third-party, and thus we have examined various individual's usage of language from afar. If we return to our characters, A and B who are discussing C, and try to apply the above analysis *from the standpoint of either A or B*, we might have difficulty. Indeed, what if A and B know some fact about C that a third-party listener is not privy to? Perhaps, for example, A and B know that C may not be the most honest person—a fact a disinterested observer would not know. If this is the case, then B's comment of "she likes [her new job], her co-workers, and hasn't been to prison yet" may not necessarily violate a maxim of the cooperative principle. In our previous analysis of A and B's conversation, we assumed that something funny must be occurring since prison, an unrelated topic, was brought up out of nowhere and thus, to an observer, it *seemed* as if language broke and

B's comment became foregrounded. Perhaps that only tells half of the story, however. Given this misunderstanding, it seems important to draw a distinction between intra- and extra- conversational analyses where the ontological status of language is mutable.

Indeed, where intra-conversational analyses seem to necessarily focus on the knowledge the speakers in the conversation have, extra-conversational analyses seem to focus merely on the speakers and their interaction. In other words, where an intra-conversational analysis of A and B will consider A and B's experiences and shared knowledge, an extra-conversational analysis of the same entities would only be able to consider the explicit interaction between the two parties. The implication of this is that the breakage of language is subjective and is contingent upon who is doing the analysis. Supposing A is our analyst and she has the shared knowledge with B that C is a dishonest person, then B's seemingly maxim-flouting response is perfectly sensible. For her, language has not broken, as she is privy to certain information, and thus language remains firmly in the domain of the ready-to-hand. On the other hand, however, if we are to affirm our analysis above—that is to say, an extra-conversational analysis—then it seems as if language has broken and becomes present-at-hand. While there may certainly be odd ontological implications of such a superposition of language, I both cannot see them at the moment and do not have the spatial luxury to examine them. As such, they must be bracketed.

Ultimately, while there are some linguistic interactions that fall outside the scope of the Heideggerian-Gricean analysis (instances of sarcasm, for example) that may require significant amounts of mental calorie burning to subsume under the theory, viewing language as a tool is, itself, a tool. While the 'tool-theory' of language will no doubt need to be augmented with additional qualifications to cover a wider range of linguistic practices and extenuating circumstances, I believe that it can both serve as a foundation for understanding ways in which conversations and language *generally* work and begin to crack to the shell of our fixed ontology.