Article

Utterer Meaning, Misunderstanding, and Cultural Knowledge

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Abstract: All versions of Grice’s theory of utterer meaning couch success in terms of stressing the hearer’s ability to recognize what is intended. This ties naturally to the cooperative principle and the maxims of conversation. A later additional maxim of manner emphasizes that one should always facilitate the audience’s response in one’s communication. Meaning communication is successful with the right “uptake”, whether seen in the desires or beliefs that Grice addressed in the audience, or the achievement of understanding or comprehension that critics identified. In retrospective reflections, Grice saw the latter necessitated by the former. The point remains that if Grice is correct in requiring audience recognition for the successful communication of meaning, then this poses serious challenges for scholars working in argumentation. It provides, for example, an additional problem when exploring cross-cultural argumentative exchanges where societies have had no prior experience of each other, their norms, or shared beliefs. Moreover, the conditions that it requires makes misunderstanding a central concern. These problems are explored in the paper, beginning with an initial assumption that Grice is correct about meaning, with a view to considering whether there is need for modifications to Grice’s theory.

Keywords: Grice; cross-cultural argument; psychological context; recognition; utterer’s meaning

1. Introduction

The intersection of Pragmatics and Argumentation Theory captures the common interest both have in firm understandings of the ways language operates in argumentation and argumentative communication operates in pragmatics. This interest is probably most vividly captured in the importance both fields accord to speech act theory. The work of J. L. Austin (1962) and John Searle (1969) features prominently in the work of pragmaticians, and their analyses are fundamental to theoretical approaches to argumentation such as that promoted by the pragma-dialecticians (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984) and, to a lesser degree, informal logicians (see Tindale, forthcoming). While less frequently referenced, Paul Grice’s logic of communication, with its related theory of utterer’s meaning, has also played an important role in the work of argumentation theorists (Tindale 2015, chp. 6), and it is this work that will be the focus of attention here.

Argumentation theorists are well aware of the foundational importance of Grice’s work on language. His theories of conversation and utterance meaning laid the ground for such diverse subsequent models as Deidre Wilson and Dan Sperber’s relevance theory (Wilson and Sperber 1981); Norman Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1985); and even the normative pragmatics of American rhetoricians such as Jean Goodwin and Fred Kaufeld (2009). While the influence is there, a full appreciation of some of its consequences is still in process.

The problem addressed in this paper is one that emerges if we take seriously Grice’s work on utterance meaning. Through the various iterations of the formula Grice (1989) used, one of the constants that ensured the correct communication of meaning by an utterer was the hearer’s recognition of the utterer’s intention to mean something. This is a prerequisite for even asking what the actual meaning is. We see Grice make this point, for example, in the simplest and most complex versions of the account.
“\(U\) meant something by uttering \(x\)” is true iff, for some audience \(A\), \(U\) uttered \(x\) intending:

1. \(A\) to produce a particular response \(r\)
2. \(A\) to think (recognize) that \(U\) intended (1)
3. \(A\) to fulfill (1) on the basis of his fulfillment of (2). (Grice 1989, p. 92)

And:

“\(U\) utters \(x\) intending \(A\)
1. to produce \(r\)
2. to think \(U\) intends \(A\) to produce \(r\)
3. to think \(U\) intends the fulfillment of (1) to be based on the fulfillment of (2)” (Grice 1989, p. 105)

The bulk of Grice’s work presupposes this possibility. Let me make clear that what I take to be interesting here is not just the specific intention \(U\) has in any particular situation, but that \(U\) intends anything at all. Over the seven pages of text in which Grice reformulates his account of meaning intention, various \(rs\) are used in examples. A shopkeeper, for instance, recognizes in \(U\)’s (non-linguistic) act of putting down the exact amount of money for \(U\)’s usual packet of cigarettes that \(U\) means they want to buy the cigarettes, and the shopkeeper responds by providing them. Grice’s maxims of conversation, while directing the activities of the speaker, all presuppose an environment in which the speaker and hearer share enough of a common background for such intentions to be recognized. In the additional maxim of manner provided in the paper “Presupposition and Implicature”, Grice makes it explicit:

“I would be inclined to suggest that we add to the maxims of Manner which I originally propounded some maxim which would be, as it should be, vague: “Frame whatever you say in the form most suitable for any reply that would be regarded as appropriate”; or, “Facilitate in your form of expression the appropriate reply.” (Grice 1989, p. 273)

This presupposes without question that such utterers know their audiences well enough to design their messages in terms that will be understood because they are recognized as meaningful. But how well should we trust such a presupposition? Moreover, while we can trace this understanding to Grice, he is not alone in holding this position. Generally, meaning communication is successful with the right “uptake”, whether this is understood in terms of the desires or beliefs that Grice addressed in the audience, or the achievement of understanding or comprehension that critics such as Searle (cited in Grice 1989, p. 351) and Strawson (1964) identified.

If indeed audience recognition of a speaker’s intentions (including the intention to be understood) is necessary for the successful communication of meaning, then this poses a layer of complexity for scholars working in argumentation as they consider the range of contextual conditions that need to be in place if argumentative acts are to be recognized as such. It also poses particular challenges for cross-cultural argumentation, where the absence of such contextual conditions makes difficult the possibility of such recognition. It is the implications of this problem for argumentation theory that are of particular concern in this paper. Martin Hinton (2020, p. 35) observed that argumentation theorists have not paid sufficient attention to Grice’s work. Even here, however, Hinton is referring to just the theory of implicature and not the theory of utterer’s meaning. Indeed, there has been useful work conducted on whether or not there are argumentative implicatures (see Moldovan 2012).1 It is with the theory of utterer’s meaning, however, that the problem addressed here arises, and it assumes a circumstance that appears before implicatures can even begin to have an effect.2

What is at stake, it seems, is not so much what we mean when we communicate, but, as I. A. Richards (1936) pointed out some time ago, how we mean. The next section explores Richards on this point and the ways it is addressed throughout his work.
2. How We Mean

In work that certainly operates on the pragmatics/argumentation border, I. A. Richards (1936), as noted, shifted the attention from what a word means to how it means, focusing rather on the processes involved in meaning communication. With C. K. Ogden (Ogden and Richards 1923), Richards explored the fault lines of meaning in a way that may lead readers to wonder how it is we ever communicate.

Indeed, this concern for miscomprehension was a question that occupied Richards in a series of studies in which he puzzled over the problems involved with understanding. Along these lines, he had defined “rhetoric” as the study of misunderstanding and its remedies (Richards 1936, p. 3). Setting aside the unusual nature of such a definition,3 it is the promise of remedies that attracts the eye here. “Surely”, he writes elsewhere, “it should be possible to go directly to the root of the trouble, to study verbal misunderstanding, its nature and cause, deeply enough to find and apply a cure?” (Richards 1942, p. 18). Here, he is considering the reading of texts, but we might suggest something similar can hold for the comprehension of other types of utterances in spite of the very different situations involved.

A further decade on, in “Toward a Theory of Comprehending”, Richards explores how utterances are conveyed in order to retain the intended meaning. The focus here is on the meaning and not the intention to mean something, but he brings the speech situation into the discussion in a way that allows a broader consideration. Speaking of the “fields” of comparison that permit translation of meanings, he says “Let the units of which these comparison fields consist be utterances-within-situations” (Richards 1955, p. 23, emphasis in the original). Utterances arise within speech situations. Around the same time, J.L Austin was insisting that what matters most in the approach to speech acts was understanding “the total speech situation” (Austin 1962).4

In his account of utterances-within-situations, Richards cites the earlier work he had done with C. K. Ogden (Ogden and Richards 1923), and a review of this material is insightful. The relevant discussion is that of interpretation, the contexts of which are deemed to include past occurrences of a similar nature (p. 53). “Interpretation”, they suggest, “is only possible thanks to these recurrent contexts . . . To say, indeed, that anything is an interpretation is to say that it is a member of a psychological context of a certain kind. An interpretation is itself a recurrence” (pp. 55–56). Such contexts involve both external and psychological factors. It is the latter that is of greater interest. The former—the external factors—are those features of context that mark a situation as involving communication. It may invoke the history of the communicators on the issue in question and on other issues. The psychological context, however, involves “a recurrent set of mental events peculiarly related to one another so as to recur, as regards their main features, with partial uniformity” (p. 57). Related to one another how? Through experience, without which no recognition (or inference for that matter) would be possible. The psychological contexts are connected with external contexts “in a peculiar fashion”.5 Where no connection pertains, “we are said to be mistaken” (p. 57). Hence, the attention in Richards’ work to misunderstanding and its remedies. Thus, to return specifically to the utterance-in-situation of Richards’ later work, comprehending involves now a “nexus”—a term that has replaced context—that has been established through occurrences of similar utterances in similar situations (Richards 1955, p. 23). By extension of this, what hearers recognize in a speaker’s utterance is a similar context of communication. The conditions involved are parallel, and successful comprehension presupposes recognition of an intention to be comprehended.

When Austin invoked the total speech situation, he seemed to be thinking along similar lines, although he is less forthcoming on what “total” might entail. Austin insisted that the “total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating” (Austin 1962, p. 148, again, the italics are in the original). Earlier in How to Do Things with Words, he explains that:

“in order to see what can go wrong with statements we cannot just concentrate on the proposition involved (whatever that is) as has been traditionally done.
We must consider the total situation in which the utterance is issued—the total speech act—if we are to see the parallel between statements and performative utterances, and how each can go wrong." (p. 52)

It is interesting to note the concern that Austin shares with Richards about what can go wrong (further suggesting some influence between them). Of course, Austin assigns additional senses to “going wrong” beyond miscomprehension. Nevertheless, the account fits into our general interest in how communicators recognize the intentions involved. As we will see below, with respect to argumentation the issue goes beyond just understanding what can go wrong; we want equally to understand what can go right in order to improve our practices. Also, in situations where communicators encounter each other in new cultural environments, we want to understand what it is that is going on; to identify argumentation in unfamiliar contexts.

The depth of Richards’ study of utterances is seen in the functions of language that he believes are involved. He identified seven: 1. Indicating; 2. Characterizing; 3. Realizing; 4. Valuing; 5. Influencing; 6. Controlling; 7. Purposing (Richards 1955, p. 26). There is no constant logical order to these. He proposes that any “full utterance does all these things at once, and invites all of them in the comprehender” (p. 27). There is something of interest to be explored in each of these “functions”, but it is Realizing that is relevant to the current discussion. There are two relevant senses of “realized’: one has to do with achieving what one sets out to achieve; the other with recognizing how something would be taken. It is the second that concerns Richards (and us). Within this sense, two lines of interpretation arise: person A imagines “vividly and livingly” how person B would feel, and person A “foresaw” how person B would act (Richards 1955, p. 32). These meanings come close to the kind of anticipation Grice advocated in his additional maxim of manner: they amount to facilitating the reply from the hearer. The reply is a response that presupposes a matching realization on the part of the hearer—that of being addressed.

How we mean, Richards suggests, depends on the shared nexuses in which we operate, nexuses built through utterances in similar situations.

3. The Challenges of the Cross-Cultural

The importance of such nexuses can be tracked in cognate fields such as anthropology. There, we find debates around a pair of terms and their associated meanings, introduced by Kenneth Pike (1966), namely “etic” and “emic”. They address different ways in which the linguistic anthropologist might approach interpretation: analyses from the etic standpoint are “alien” in view, with criteria external to the system (Pike 1966, p. 153). In etic reports, “the human element brings in great differences” (p. 163), according to the background of a particular observer. The emic standpoint studies behavior from inside the system of a specific culture. Obviously, it would be judged the preferred approach, issuing from within the group and capturing the perspective of the subject. That, at least, is the hope. The problem, however, quickly shifts to the how of achieving results that are emic in nature. The problem is compounded by the observation that emic criteria “require a knowledge of the total system to which they are relative and from which they ultimately draw their significance” (p. 154). Once again, misunderstanding is all too likely. Still, approaches to argumentation of all kinds need to keep the emicist’s understanding in mind if the goal is to retrieve the live situations in which argumentation has been experienced.

Admittedly, this is not the aim of all argumentation theorists (at least not all the time). Erik Krabbe (2021), for example, provides a graphic illustration of the etic perspective at work in his analysis of a complex argument in one of Plato’s dialogues. He specifically allows that his reconstruction was not aimed at capturing Plato’s intentions, noting that “Generally, the purpose of argument analysis is not to reconstruct the intentions of the arguer, but the way the argument is best understood . . . Often the aim is to grasp the way the argument would have been generally understood in the culture and the context in which it has been presented” (p. 182). That is the hope “generally”. However, there is a tension here between not reconstructing the intentions of the arguer and capturing how the...
argument would have been understood. On the terms we have derived from Grice, the latter depends on the former.

Krabbe specifically states that “the purpose of the reconstruction was to get a better understanding of the argument as it appears today” (p. 182). He does this by applying a modern-day formal system (predicate logic). His interest is then in what the argument has to tell us, today, rather than to try to recover how it might have been received by an audience in Plato’s time. To do the latter, we would need to work with a completely different set of understandings, one that involved the belief systems of fifth-century Athens and the assumptions of Platonic thought. This would be the minimal expectation if we wanted to evaluate argumentation from the perspective of Grice’s theory of implicature (Hinton 2020; Moldovan 2012), let alone his theory of utterer’s meaning. Krabbe’s approach here illustrates that not all argumentation theorists will be particularly concerned by the problem that motivates this discussion. There are important reasons, however, why theorists should be interested in reconstructing argumentation as it is intended, recognized, and experienced. That is, that they should adopt something of the emicist’s perspective across situations within their own communities and in exchanges with others. An anthropological appreciation of how we argue and have argued in the past is of value here. How else can we study the ways in which argumentation has modified the environments in which we think and act, improving the societies in which we live?

4. Argumentation at the Borders

Fabrizio Macagno (2012) approaches the speaker’s meaning by looking at common knowledge (as a central feature of context) and implicature. He proceeds this way in order to address “one of the most controversial topics in linguistics” (p. 234), namely the relationship between context and meaning. While his interest is largely in implicatures and Grice’s associated theory, there are several parts of his discussion that bear on our concerns. He draws attention, for example, to the relationship between speaker’s meaning, utterance meaning, and hearer’s meaning, noting that any utterance has a goal and its success depends in part on whether or not it can be achieved (p. 245). In order to proceed, the speaker must rely on presumptions that govern the situation. How can the speaker know what the other knows, that the other is interested in what the speaker says, and shares the necessary information to understand? “The speaker can only presume that some pieces of information are shared, or that the hearer is interested in some facts, entities or events and that [the hearer] shares some specific values” (p. 246). Of course, not knowing what the hearer knows, the speaker must look for clues in the context. The speaker is constrained by time to act “in conditions of lack of evidence” (p. 248) and can only presume the hearer’s response.

This is addressing the right kind of questions and offering plausible suggestions for approaching a situation similar to hearer recognition of the speaker’s intention as the Gricean formula proposed it. Macagno includes under a heading of “implicit knowledge”, for example, that the hearer knows basic logical rules and basic encyclopedic information (p. 250). Such shared information, we might allow, presumes a shared cognitive environment that licenses a number of inferences on the part of the speaker, inferences required for communication in situations of uncertainty. In the sphere of argumentation, Macagno draws on the tools offered by relevant argumentation schemes,9 most particularly, the scheme that expresses reasoning to the best explanation. Depending on the situation and the facts involved, different explanations can account for phenomena of interest. The scheme identifies the explanation that is best from among those most plausible. The reasoning involves two steps (captured in the premises of the scheme): “the abduction of an explanation, and the comparison between the explanations” (p. 255). Importantly, the explanation promoted in the conclusion is plausible, not guaranteed. Conclusions of such reasoning are deemed to be defeasible, that is, they have a strong provisional acceptability but remain open to revision in light of further evidence coming to light, immediately or in
the future. Again, these proposals, transferred to the current, related discussion, begin to offer the right kind of useful advice, and draw on argumentation theory in doing so.

The tools Macagno employs flow from the conception of argumentation as a type of communication operating in contexts of dialogue. While argumentation theory actually comprises different accounts of how it operates, there is general agreement that it is a communicative activity (Willard 1989, p. 38; Tindale 2015, p. 22) even if not at the simple sentence level (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, p. 29). In this way, accounts will share understandings of arguments as means of expression, often through utterances, intended to modify states of affairs.

**Arguments**

Talk of shared environments may divert attention from a central feature of many arguments that will be of interest to us: they are events of disagreement. Without the differences of view involved, there would be no issue, disagreement, problem, and so forth. Thus, a rhetoric of argument has as one goal to address differences. Roland Barthes (1978) focuses on the distancing involved in argumentative situations in providing a preliminary definition: “Argumentum . . . instrument of distancing” (p. 5). It is this distancing that gives rise to the possibility of misunderstanding. Hence, some accounts of rhetoric, such as that of I. A. Richards (1936), study misunderstanding and its remedies, and others how the distance between arguer and audience is negotiated (Meyer 2017).

In the kinds of pragmatic contexts of interest here, arguing is judged a complex speech act, involving the acts of asserting reasons and the act of concluding (Corredor 2021). One of the most influential theories of argumentation that has endorsed a speech act approach on its own terms is the pragma-dialectical theory of the Dutch school. Its originators, Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst, observe that people generally strive to communicate in ways that expedite understanding, and so when they perform speech acts, they adopt rules that facilitate this. Underlying such rules is a general principle—the Principle of Communication—that, they claim, is similar to Grice’s Co-operative Principle (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, p. 50). As far as is apparent, this is the closest they come to addressing the “recognition problem” identified in Section 1 above. A speaker needs to formulate communications in a way that allows the hearer to identify “its communicative function”, and “if identity conditions are not met, the speech act is incomprehensible” (p. 50). The speech acts involved are, importantly, interactional (House and Kádár 2021, p. 105).

In spite of this endorsement, the pragma-dialectical account falls short of what we need here on at least two fronts: (i) As Cristina Corredor (2021) observes of the approach: “for pragma-dialectics, a complex speech act is an act of arguing provided that, and to the extent that, the listener grasps the attempt by the speaker to convince them (of the acceptability of a viewpoint)” (p. 461). On this interpretation, the argument lies in its reception. Corredor does not “share the underlying intuition that the communicative (illocutionary) dimension of argumentation consists of the listener’s understanding the speaker’s attempt, and that the interactional aspect is constrained to the perlocutionary effects” (p. 461). (ii) To this we might add that, similar to Grice’s basic account, the pragma-dialectical account is vulnerable to the charge that it is culturally specific, and thus, actually insulated from the wider appreciation to which it aspires. It exhibits, argues Carlos Gomez, a mono-cultural nature (Gómez 2012, pp. 156–64). That is, a number of the rules and the expectations associated with them reflect the argumentative behavior of certain groups of people and are not necessarily relevant to (or recognizable by) other groups.

A more promising approach, offering ideas that can be added to those collected above, is the rhetorical model of Charles Willard (1989). Among other things, he asserts and defends the initially surprising claim that complete common ground is not necessary for successful communication. Willard has long been recognized for his criticism of the “standard” version of speech act theory, and particularly the direction it took post-Austin under Searle’s direction (see Tindale 1999, p. 82ff). Most importantly, what Willard has done
is expand the field of “argument” to include what might not normally be captured under “utterance”. Or, as he would say, he expands not so much the definition of argument but “the definition of the sphere of relevance” (p. 92). He will include, paralinguistic, gestural, and facial cues, features which, if not part of some argumentative communications, are certainly preliminary to them insofar as their meaning facilitates the understandings that are active in argumentative situations.

An example of this expanded sense of argument may serve us here. In June of 2020, one of the leaders of the opposition parties in the Canadian parliament, Jagmeet Singh, was removed from the parliament building for “unparliamentary behavior”. What had he done? He had called one of the members of the Bloc Québécois (another opposition party) a racist. That member had voted against a motion that would have addressed systemic racism in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police force (RCMP). What angered Singh in particular was that the member in question had made a dismissive gesture. He had flipped his hand “like someone trying to brush off a fly”. As Singh interpreted that gesture, it was argumentative, conveying a position that had a particular meaning within the context: “In that gesture, I saw exactly what has happened for so long. People see racism as not a big deal, see systemic racism and the killing of Indigenous people as not a big deal, see Black people being the subject of violence and being killed as not a big deal, and in the moment I saw the face of racism”. Strictly speaking, the Bloc member had said nothing, but he had implicated a lot, and his gesture constituted a meaningful argumentative act, understood as such by the audience. The dismissive gesture had clear cultural currency and would be interpreted by anyone in the relevant culture in the same way that it was interpreted by Singh. As an example, it not only illustrates what Willard had in mind when referring to a sphere of relevance and drawing on “what everybody knows” (Willard 1989, p. 97), it also illustrates Michael Gilbert’s (1997) visceral mode of argumentation.

Influenced by Willard, and understanding argumentation as a subspecies of the general category of human communication, Gilbert identified three modes of argumentation reflecting conceptually distinct sources beyond the traditional logical mode. In addition to modes that capture the emotional and the intuitive, Gilbert’s visceral mode captures arguments that “are primarily physical and can range from a touch to classical nonverbal communication, i.e., body language, to force” (Gilbert 1997, p. 84). Gestures fit this mode. Recall Grice’s example of the cigarette purchaser who conveys his intention to buy by offering the correct change. While all gestures communicate, some communicate arguments, and Singh’s case shows how this happens. Drawing on cultural meaning, Singh saw in the gesture of his parliamentary colleague an argument for a position he recognized as racist. There is a necessary level of interpretation here, and it would be difficult to “reduce” the argument to propositional form (premises and conclusion), but the core meaning is clear and would be recognized by anyone sharing Singh’s cultural background.

This is the point we take away from the example: that hearers (or readers) recognize more than the utterance of discourse, and intentions cannot be limited in that way. By expanding the category of argumentation to include “non-traditional” reasons, we expand the argumentative situation and the sphere of interaction between communicators.

5. Recognizing Reasons

I turn now to Willard’s other challenging thesis: the denial “that communication requires common ground” (p. 258). This needs to be appreciated in the context of his “interactionist” model. In this account, while speakers must realize they are interacting, that is about the limit to any parity involved. Participants are generally unequal in terms of the information they possess or any position of power they may hold (pp. 50–51). Willard does believe in the reciprocity of perspectives drawn from ethnomethodological thinking, where two people assume that if they changed places they “would see the encounter similarly” (p. 58). That is, an emicist view can supplant the etic. This is the only hint of a shared expectation. Clearly, Willard’s sense of what is shared here falls short of the full understanding of common ground that is at stake. Inequality between participants,
however, does indicate the difficulty of understanding involved. Norman Fairclough (1985), for example, observes that Grice’s theory of conversation assumes interaction between equals, or at least those capable of equal contribution (p. 757).

Rather than common ground, Willard shifts attention to common interests, which he believes are best captured by talking of “positions”. Two senses are put forward, and it is the second—more rhetorical—sense that is instructive. One sense of “position”—position_1—involves a public stance; the other sense—position_2—involves “a personal stance, one’s analysis of the coherence between one’s beliefs, attitudes, and intentions and one’s public message or public stance” (p. 263). With position_2 a person is translating their intentions into messages and strategies, searching for the available means to communicate, transferring what is private into something communicable. Now, arguably, what Grice imagines for hearer recognition must be along these lines when we recall the additional maxim of manner: “Frame whatever you say in the form most suitable for any reply that would be regarded as appropriate”; or, “Facilitate in your form of expression the appropriate reply” (Grice 1989, p. 273). Granted, Grice assumes a considerable amount of shared understanding, especially of the conventions involved. However, what the emphasis encouraged by Willard provides is a direction that does not necessarily assume that ground of commonality. Thus, Lilian Bermejo-Luque’s gloss of Grice on this point is useful. “Grice progressively refined his definition of speaker’s meaning, but the core idea is that it is what we understand when we recognize the communicative intention of the speaker, where this recognition is possible thanks to the way the speaker has shaped her utterance in order to enable her addressee to recognize her communicative intention, given the features of the context that are salient for both speaker and addressee” (Bermejo-Luque 2011, p. 152, my italics). “U meant something by uttering x” is true iff, for some audience A, U uttered x intending A to produce a particular response r, and so forth, where U’s intention involves the facilitation of the recognition. That is, the utterance is directly audience-considered in its composition and delivery. Recognition depends not so much on the audience grasping the intention as on the intention arresting the audience in the right way (a way that involves the grasping of the intention secondarily).

We are able to address others in this nuanced way, argumentation theory tells us, because our ability to communicate (not just to issue utterances) is predicated on our understanding of what it means to be addressed. Being-in-audience is a way of being in the world that we share (Crosswhite 1996, pp. 139–40). It is an expression of our rhetorical nature. Aristotle (2007) observed as much when he defined rhetoric itself as the “capacity to see the available means of persuasion” (Rhet. 1355b26). This capacity (dunamis) is a potentiality that is actualized in rhetorical situations. It is just such a structure that seems captured in Richard Lanham’s (1976) identification of homo rhetorius (set in contrast to homo seriosus), for whom such social situations are the lowest common denominator of life (p. 4).

The argumentative theory of reasoning of more recent interactionists, Mercier and Sperber (2017), defends the thesis that reason has evolved in humans in order that we can justify our decisions to ourselves and others, and evaluate the reasons of others. Their model also assumes the rhetorical nature of humans identified in the last paragraph. “As communicators”, they write, “we are addressing people who, if they don’t just believe us on trust, check the degree to which what we can tell them coheres with what they already believe on an issue. Since we all are at times addressees, we are in a position to understand how, when we communicate, our audience evaluates what we tell them” (p. 194, my emphasis). The echo of this idea, thus, repeats enough for it to be taken seriously as part of the solution to our problem.

Several threads spun earlier start to weave together here. Fabrizio Macagno explored the importance of certain types of contexts and meanings for argumentation with a valuable emphasis on the presumption that must be involved, and his input gains substance from the richer ideas on psychological context provided by I. A. Richards. This particular kind of speech situation—his utterance-within-situations—alerts us to the kinds of things relevant to meaning intentions. In the model of psychological context, Richards adopts
the emicist’s desire to understand the other’s feelings, imagining “vividly and livingly” how another person would feel and act (Richards 1955, p. 32). Gilbert’s modes help here, especially an understanding of the emotional mode. However, in cross-cultural argumentation that “recurrent set of mental events peculiarly related to one another” that constitutes psychological context (Ogden and Richards 1923, p. 57) needs to be set in process. The clues that inform a first interaction are highly susceptible to misinterpretation and misunderstanding threatens success. This, suggests Richards, is the unavoidable condition of such communicative events, and misunderstanding and its remedies the fitting subject for the rhetorically minded theorist of argumentation.

Indeed, understanding can only have evolved out of serious and serial misunderstanding, as people’s experiences of each other expanded to accommodate the nexuses necessary for shared meaning. Building on the experience of being addressed within one’s own community, and thus, recognizing others as addressable, early encounters sought the available means to communicate in spite of the absence of a common ground. The privacy of one culture is laid open to another; the emicist perspective becomes possible.

6. Conclusions

It might have been that Grice was simply wrong. Several components of his theory of communication have been criticized and modified (Wilson and Sperber 1981) and his theory of utterance meaning has certainly not escaped challenge. On utterer’s meaning, however, there are reasons to judge him correct. It follows from this, drawing out the maxim(s) of manner, that meaning is a shared accomplishment, even when the participants cross cultures. Like trust, recognition is something that depends on the audience rather than the speaker to provide it. However, also similar to trust, recognition depends on how the speaker combines features of the context in the construction of the utterance.

Having argumentation manifest itself in different cultures is no surprise. In this respect, it simply joins many other activities and practices. It is this underlying experience (rhetorical in nature) that makes viable the success of cross-cultural argumentation, in spite of the tendency towards misunderstanding more often than not (particularly in earlier encounters). The common experience of addressing and being addressed, however, sets the foundation for recognition, in the way I have described it, to be successful. Moreover, this success is, plausibly, success as understood on Gricean terms.

Wayne Brockriede (2006) insists that an argument is only an argument if and when it is perceived by another as an argument. “Human activity does not usefully constitute an argument until some person perceives what is happening as an argument” (p. 4). This is recognition from a different direction, but it is recognition nonetheless. It also makes possible the study of the remedies of misunderstanding that a full appreciation of communication (and argumentation) requires.

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Notes

1 Moldovan does consider whether argumentative implicatures, should they exist, are part of speaker meaning. The norms at issue, however, are judged to not be norms of communication (Moldovan 2012, p. 310).

2 Two further argumentation theorists, Fabrizio Macagno (2012) and Lilian Bermejo-Luque (2011), do address more directly the issue of retrieving the speaker’s meaning. I consider relevant remarks from their accounts later in the paper.

3 McCloskey notes “rhetoric is a word like democracy or freedom, a complicated matter not easily put onto a 3” × 5” card” (McCloskey 1994, p. 273), and then proceeds to compare it to the proverbial elephant, which appears very differently depending on which part is being described.
While generally reluctant to endorse a definition of argument, Willard’s focus on interaction offers the following: “Events” because such arguments capture complex situations that involve more than the propositions of which they consist.

Argumentation schemes are regular patterns of plausible reasoning that have a common usage. The patterns involve a series of sentential forms with variables that are replaced in actual arguments by the specifics of a case. Some scheme theorists, such as Macagno, strive to achieve an objective standard of evaluation through the identification of a set of critical questions associated with each scheme.

Arguments are instrumental in processes of inquiry, for example. Furthermore, similar to other communication devices, they have different goals, and so not all will be marked by difference or disagreement. Arguments are instrumental in processes of inquiry, for example.

By employing a typology of speech acts that includes both the interactional and relational, House and Kádár (2021) address the criticism that speech act typologies tend to exhibit a Western bias (p. 106).

While generally reluctant to endorse a definition of argument, Willard’s focus on interaction offers the following: “argument is a kind of interaction in which two or more people maintain what they construe to be incompatible positions” (Willard 1989, p. 42, italics in the original), a definition that Willard adopts from his earlier book (Willard 1983, p. 21).

References


Strawson, Peter Frederick. 1964. Intention and convention in speech acts. Philosophical Review 73: 439–60. [CrossRef]


