

When Language Breaks: A Heideggerian Analysis of Grice's 'Cooperative Principle'

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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. 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 we engage in conversation and nothing "goes wrong," our 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 we are using 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 which, ultimately, helps us flatten ontology and rethink the existential status of objects.

Part 1: Grice and Conversational Implicature

In “Logic and Conversation,” H. P. Grice makes the case that when humans engage in everyday discursive interactions, we are abiding by an implicit and assumed set of rules governing how we 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 us to make sense of what the other person is saying without requiring constant clarification.¹ Indeed, according to Grice, as we talk we tend to abide by certain maxims that help make sure 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 don’t 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 for manner the four maxims are as follows: avoid obscurity and ambiguity, be brief, and be orderly.² For Grice, not only do the aforementioned categories and maxims structure how we 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 parabus*, 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 sense (and I mean this in a broadly post-Fregean context without necessarily being committed to Frege’s metaphysics) 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, upon seeing such a sight, were to ask what happened, John would typically respond with an answer that is not overly florid, tells what he sees as being the facts of the situation, and is relevant to Jane’s query. 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 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.”³ 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. 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

¹ H. P. Grice, “Logic and Conversation,” in *The Philosophy of Language*, ed. A. P. Martinich and David Sosa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 314.

² Grice, “Logic and Conversation,” 314-315.

³ *Ibid.*, 313.

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: first is a strictly semantic way, and 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 wherein we don't focus on language *as such*, rather we just use it. In the latter, our use of language is foregrounded and we suddenly notice semantic oddities in our discourse and are forced to think about what we *mean* 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.

Part 2: Heidegger and the Broken Hammer

In Heidegger's discussion of entities encountered in the world in his magnum opus, *Being and Time*, he takes note of a peculiar feature of the way *Dasein* – for our purposes, we will understand *Dasein* to mean 'humans' and shall use the two interchangeably (much to the chagrin of Heidegger scholars) – interact with objects in the world. 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ In a word, as Graham Harman notes, "Heidegger contends that our primary way of dealing with things is *absence*."⁷

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. What's more, Heidegger's tool-analysis doesn't just apply to "tools" as they are typically understood – that is to say as "low-tech hardware" used

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 97-98.

⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 97-98.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 102-103.

⁷ Graham Harman, "The Return to Metaphysics (2011)," in *Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2013), 15.

to complete a certain goal – , but rather applies to all objects.⁸ 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.

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 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.

Part 3: When Language Breaks

While there are no shortage of explanations about *how* language works, the question of what language *is* seems to be too large to tackle.⁹ 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’s 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 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.

⁸ Graham Harman, “Technology, objects and things in Heidegger,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34, no. 1 (January 2010), 17.

⁹ See A. P. Martinich and David Sosa, *The Philosophy Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Successes of language are only marginally interesting, however. What's 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 you strike 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 wasn't 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's 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 while not affecting 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? Ought 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 and he'll tell her the story of his car troubles there (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's 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.¹⁰ In other words, the flat ontological shift allows us to maintain the position that a hammer is no more real than the language we use to describe the hammer, and that neither one is reducible to the other. The ultimate implication of this 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*.¹¹ 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."

¹⁰ Levi Bryant, "The Four Theses of Flat Ontology," in *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011), 245-290.

¹¹ Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, Or What It's Like to Be A Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

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