

# OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION *MEANING AND EMOTION*

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This dissertation may be divided into two parts. The first is about the Extended Gricean Model of information transmission, a new model which I here introduce. The second is about what emotional signs mean, in various senses of the term 'mean'.

## PART 1. THE EXTENDED GRICEAN MODEL

Part 1 is constituted of four chapters: the first one sets a problem that needs to be solved, the second one presents a solution – the Extended Gricean model – while the third and the fourth are applications of the model.

In Chapter 1 – 'A Blind Spot in the Standard Picture of Information Transmission' – I ask: How do we know when laughter indicates embarrassment or mirth? I explain why there are no satisfying answers to be found in the relevant literature. My diagnostic is that the standard picture of information transmission presupposes that there are two ways in which we may communicate or otherwise exchange information, each respectively being accountable for by the code models and the existing Gricean models. However, neither of them adequately applies to the cases I present. The meaning of laughter resists both kinds of models. It resists the code model because what is transmitted by a laugh often goes beyond what is encoded in it. We usually understand more from a laugh than what could be predicted based merely on a code, and by 'code' I mean a pre-established pairing between kinds of laughter and what information they carry. This is because the same sounds, the same laughter, may mean that the person is embarrassed, mirthful, afraid, joyful, and many other things. The same conclusion applies to many other emotional expressions: a smile may mean happiness, compassion, and aggressiveness; a frown may indicate anger, incomprehension, and concentration; a sigh may signal relief, fatigue, and disappointment; etc. The cases I present also resist the prevailing Gricean models because the latter only applies to so-called speaker-meaning, i.e. what sign-producers intend their signs to mean. The problem is that we often laugh spontaneously, without intending the laughter to mean what it nevertheless means.

In Chapter 2 – which is the central chapter of Part 1 and, in fact, of the entire dissertation – I present the Extended Gricean Model of information transmission. This model is supposed to apply to cases, such as the case of laughter from Chapter 1, that can be accounted for by neither the prevailing Gricean models nor the code models of information transfer. This model preserves much from its antecedents, the prevailing Gricean models, but contrary to them it is not restricted to what people intend to mean with the signs they produce. Instead, it extends to what they *allow* the signs they produce to mean. The central notion is not anymore that of speaker-meaning, but that of *allower-meaning*.

While Chapter 2 presents the Extended Gricean Model quite abstractly, Chapter 3 is dedicated to illustrating the model, thereby exploring its breadth as well as its boundaries. It begins with the examples of laughter presented in Chapter 1, showing how it can explain what information is carried by such stimuli, and then discusses other

kinds of stimuli: nonverbal affective signs, some behavioral signs, clothing, but also what one allows one's speech to mean beyond what intends it to mean.

In Chapter 4, I show how the Extended Gricean Model is an interesting tool to interpret the meaning of narrative artworks. The central idea here is that the meaning of a novel or a movie may be found in what the authors *allow* their work to mean even though it is not (and we know it is not) what they intended it to mean.

The four chapters of Part 1 thus constitute a presentation of the need, the nature, and the use of the Extended Gricean Model and its central concept: *allower-meaning*. This kind of meaning corresponds to a non-negligible portion of the information transmitted in everyday life but for which, to the best of my knowledge, there was no theory – at least in analytic philosophy and in linguistics.

## PART 2. WHAT EMOTIONAL SIGNS MEAN

In Part 2, I turn to existing theories of meaning and see how they apply to emotional signs, i.e. signs which give us information about the affective state of the sign producer.

In Chapter 5, I discuss how to distinguish so-called *expressives* – utterances whose goal is to express affect – from *descriptives* – utterances whose goal is to describe the world truthfully. Expressives include, for instance, insults, encouragements, and interjections (ouch, wow, yuk, etc.), while descriptives include assertions, conjectures, or suppositions. I spell out three features that importantly distinguish these types of utterances. Drawing on recent insights from the philosophy of emotion and value, I then show how the three features derive from the nature of emotions, understood as felt, bodily, value-tracking attitudes. I also indicate how speech act theory helps us clarify this claim.

Chapter 6 discusses three possible accounts of what understanding expressives amount to. The first account, *doxasticism*, claims that the audience must only take the utterer to be in a certain doxastic state (to believe, judge, suppose, doubt, ...). The second view, *moderate affectivism*, claims that the audience must believe that the utterer undergoes, or is disposed to undergo, emotions. The third view, *radical affectivism*, claims that it is not sufficient that the audience *believes* that the utterer expresses an emotion, the audience must *resonate affectively* with the expresser in order to properly understand the expressive utterance. I discuss some advantages and disadvantages of these three views, arguing that moderate and, especially, radical affectivism are in a better position to explain the distinctive features of expressives discussed in Chapter 5.

In Chapter 7, I turn to how affect may be 'naturally' encoded in stimuli, i.e. without the stimuli being intentionally designed to convey affective states. For instance, how can we explain that red cheeks can mean embarrassment or that vervet monkey alarm calls can indicate fear of a predator? I discuss two main accounts proposed in the literature: *natural meaning* and *probabilistic meaning*. I evaluate how useful they are when it comes to analyzing what emotional signs mean. I argue that natural meaning is too strict for this purpose. The notion of probabilistic meaning seems adequate to analyzing non-communicative emotional signs (e.g. pupil dilatation, perspiration, blushing), but it faces

several difficulties when it comes to analyzing communicative signs (e.g. vocal, facial, or gestural emotional expressions).

In Chapter 8, to fill the gap left by the notion of probabilistic meaning, I present and develop the notion of *teleocoded meaning*, which is largely based on previous so-called teleosemantic theories.<sup>3</sup> The idea is that certain signals *encode* certain information – i.e. these stimuli are somehow associated with certain information by communicators, as explained in Chapter 1 – and that this encoding is best explained through an evolutionary process, as opposed to an intentional design. In other words, it is the evolutionary function (hence ‘teleo’) of these signals to encode certain information (hence *teleocoded* meaning). I argue that this notion can overcome the difficulties that we saw probabilistic meaning was facing in the last chapter while preserving its advantages over natural meaning.

In the final chapter, Chapter 9, I turn to what emotions mean in and of themselves. I ask whether emotions are supposed to indicate something to the organism having them about the situation in which the organism is. I argue that they do: one of the functions of emotions is to give us information about evaluative properties, i.e. what is good or bad for us. More specifically, I argue that, if we accept widespread views of emotions, representation, evaluative properties, and consciousness, then emotions involve a component – the appraisal process – that represents evaluative properties unconsciously. From this conclusion, we may further infer that emotions represent evaluative properties *tout court*. This chapter also serves as a reference for many undefended claims I make about emotions in the other chapters. It captures much of what I have learned about emotions during my time at the Swiss Center for Affective Sciences.

By the end of the dissertation, to the best of my knowledge, I will have discussed and explored all the philosophical accounts of meaning that are relevant to answer the question ‘What do emotional signs mean?’. In fact, trying to answer this question will even have led me to define a new kind of meaning: allower-meaning, a concept which may prove useful beyond the study of emotional signs.