

5

Logic and Conversation

As Grice's enthusiasm for ordinary language philosophy became increasingly qualified during the 1950s, his interest was growing in the rather different styles of philosophy of language then current in America. Recent improvements in communications had made possible an exchange of ideas across the Atlantic that would have been unthinkable before the war. W. V. O. Quine had made a considerable impression at Oxford during his time as Eastman Professor. Grice was interested in Quine's logical approach to language, although he differed from him over certain specific questions, such as the viability of the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements. Quine, who was visiting England for a whole year, and who brought with him clothes, books and even provisions in the knowledge that rationing was still in force, travelled by ship.¹ However, during the same decade the rapid proliferation of passenger air travel enabled movement of academics between Britain and America for even short stays and lecture tours. Grice himself made a number of such visits, and was impressed by the formal and theory-driven philosophy he encountered. Most of all he was impressed by the work of Noam Chomsky.

It may seem surprising that the middle-aged British philosopher interested in the role of individual speakers in creating meaning should cite as an influence the young American linguist notorious for dismissing issues of use in his pursuit of a universal theory of language. But Grice was inspired by Chomsky's demonstration in his work on syntax of how 'a region for long found theoretically intractable by scholars (like Jespersen) of the highest intelligence could, by discovery and application of the right kind of apparatus, be brought under control'.² Less formally, he expressed admiration for an approach that did not offer 'piecemeal reflections on language' but rather where 'one got a picture

of the whole thing'.³ Chomsky's first and highly influential book *Syntactic Structures* was well known among Grice's Oxford contemporaries. The Play Group worked their slow and meticulous way through it during the autumn of 1959.⁴ Austin, in particular, was extremely impressed. Grice characterised and perhaps parodied him as revering Chomsky for his sheer audacity in taking on a subject even more sacred than philosophy: the subject of grammar.⁵ Grice's own interest was focused on theory formation and its philosophical consequences. Chomsky was taking a new approach to the study of syntax by proposing a general theory where previously there had been only localised description and analysis. He claimed, for instance, that ideally 'a formalised theory may automatically provide solutions for many problems other than those for which it was explicitly designed'.⁶ Grice's aim, it was becoming clear, was to do something similar for the study of language use.

Meanwhile, ordinary language philosophy itself was in decline. As for any school of thought, it is difficult to determine an exact endpoint, and some commentators have suggested a date as late as 1970. However, it is generally accepted that the heyday of ordinary language philosophy was during the years immediately following the Second World War. The sense of excitement and adventure that characterised its beginning began to wane during the 1950s. Despite his professed dislike of discipleship, Austin seems to have become anxious about what he perceived as the lack of a next generation of like-minded young philosophers at Oxford. It became an open secret among his colleagues that he was seriously contemplating a move to the University of California, Berkeley.⁷ No final decision was ever made. Austin died early in 1960 at the age of 48, having succumbed quickly to cancer over the previous months. Reserved and private to the last, he hid his illness from even his closest colleagues until he was unable to continue work. His death was certainly a blow to ordinary language philosophy, but it would be an exaggeration to say that it was the immediate cause of its demise. Grice, who seems to have been regarded as Austin's natural deputy, stepped in as convenor of the Play Group, which met under his leadership for the next seven years. Individuals such as Strawson, Warnock, Urmson and Grice himself continued to produce work with recognisably 'ordinary language' leanings throughout the 1960s.

Grice's interests at this time were not driven entirely by philosophical trends in Oxford and America; he was also turning his attention to some very old logical problems. In particular, he was interested in questions concerning apparent counterparts to logical constants in natural language. For instance, in the early 1960s he revisited a theme he had