

Lecture 8 Beliefs, Language, and Composition of Meaning

1. Language use and referring

‘Snowdon is difficult to climb.’

Snowdon = Yr Wyddfa

? ‘Peter thinks that Yr Wyddfa is difficult to climb.’

substitutivity *salva veritate* (truth-preserving substitution of expressions that refer to the same object)

‘The Morning Star appears in the morning.’

The Morning Star = the Evening Star

? ‘The ancients believed that the Evening Star appeared in the morning.’

(Gottlob Frege, 1892, ‘On sense and reference’ (‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’).

Sense: concept, idea, the way of thinking about the object (the celestial body that appears in the evening and the celestial body that appears in the morning); guise; mode of presentation.

Kripke’s puzzle:

(Saul A. Kripke, ‘A puzzle about belief’, in Ludlow1997)

‘Londres est joli.’

‘London is ugly.’

Principle of Translation:

‘If a sentence of one language expresses a truth in that language, then any translation of it into any other language also expresses a truth (in that other language).’

Londres = London

Disquotational Principle:

‘If a normal English speaker, on reflection, sincerely assents to “*p*”, then he believes that *p*.’

Does Pierre believe that London is pretty?

→ When can names be translated from one language to another?

‘Peter believes that Paderewski had musical talent.’

(about a pianist/statesman Paderewski)

‘Peter believes that Paderewski had *no* musical talent.’
(about a pianist/statesman Paderewski)

2. Expressions that are used to refer:

- (i) proper names (‘Bill’)
- (ii) pronouns (‘he’)
- (iii) demonstrative pronouns (‘this’, ‘that’)
- (iv) demonstrative phrases (‘that man’)
- (v) definite descriptions (‘the man in the grey coat’).

(i)-(iv) are **directly referring** expressions. These expressions contribute an object, not a description, to the meaning of the sentence: ‘Alexandra Burke’, ‘she’, ‘that woman over there’

vs. category (v): definite descriptions are normally contextually-referential rather than directly referential, e.g. ‘The singer of *Bad Boys*’ (whoever he/she is).

Example of the difference:

‘The author of *Macbeth* was a genius.’ (said about e.g. Christopher Marlowe)
‘Shakespeare was a genius’

3. Proper Names

Their *sense* is said to be the bearer of the name, the object.

But: ?‘Yr Wyddfa’ – ‘Snowdon’ (coreferential names) .

? ‘Zeus’, ‘Santa Claus’, ‘El Dorado’ (empty proper names)
‘Zeus is angry.’

Bertrand Russell’s solution: proper names are ‘disguised descriptions’.

‘An entity is Zeus if and only if it is an ancient Greek supreme god and there is only one such entity’.

There is more to the meaning of these names than just the referent. In order to have a correct semantics of proper names, we have to consider the speaker’s knowledge and the speaker’s cognitive system.

Problems with Russell’s solution:

‘The author of *Macbeth* was a genius.’ (say, Christopher Marlowe)
‘Shakespeare was a genius’

‘The winner of the Nobel Literature Prize in 2010 is an outstanding novelist.’
‘Mario Vargas Llosa is an outstanding novelist.’

The semantic properties of proper names and definite descriptions are different. The meaning of proper names depends on the object they name. The

meaning of descriptions can remain unchanged while the person or object they refer to differs with the circumstances.

4. Definite Descriptions

‘the dog’, ‘Jack’s dog’, ‘the singer of *Bad Boys*’

Gottlob Frege (1892) and neo-Fregeans (now): definite descriptions have properties similar to those of proper names, pronouns and demonstratives.

Bertrand Russell (1905, 1919) and neo-Russellians (now): definite descriptions are not directly referential; they need not pick out a particular object (referent) in the context.

‘The F is G’ is true if and only if:
At least one thing is F, and at most one thing is F, and whatever is F is G.

e.g. ‘The king of France is bald.’

is true if and only if whoever is the king of France is bald and there is only one such person.

The truth conditions of a sentence with a **proper name** are **object-dependent**; the sentence is about the individual named. The truth conditions of a sentence with a **definite description** state only that there is some entity or other that has a certain property. The truth conditions are **object-independent**. Definite descriptions are different from the class that encompasses proper names, pronouns and demonstratives.

Referential/attribution distinction:

The architect of this church was mad.

Definite descriptions are ambiguous between the **referential** interpretation, which makes them behave like proper names, and the **attributive** interpretation (‘The F is G’ is true if and only if whoever is F has the property G and there is only one such person’, cf. the king of France example above).

‘Who is the man drinking a martini?’ (about a man drinking water in a martini glass)

true on the referential reading, **false** on the attributive reading

Another problem: *incomplete descriptions*:

? ‘The table is covered with books.’

Solutions:

(?) is literally false but pragmatically conveys a true proposition.

(?) is elliptical for e.g. ‘The table at which I work every day is covered with books.’ And therefore is true.

5. Pronouns (personal pronouns), demonstratives (demonstrative pronouns) and demonstrative phrases

‘I’, ‘they’ have context-dependent reference (= **deictic** expressions). Directly referential, unlike definite descriptions.

I, ‘you’ (like ‘here’ and ‘now’) have a special property – their role in a sentence is *constant* (the speaker, the addressee, the place and time of utterance, respectively)

? *What does ‘I’ mean?*

Example 1: Supermarket and sugar trail

‘I once followed a trail of sugar on a supermarket floor, pushing my cart down the aisle on one side of a tall counter and back the aisle on the other, seeking the shopper with the torn sack to tell him he was making a mess. With each trip around the counter, the trail became thicker. But I seemed unable to catch up. Finally it dawned on me. I was the shopper I was trying to catch.’

John Perry, 1979. ‘The problem of the essential indexical’, *Noûs* 13 p. 3

‘I am making a mess.’

‘John Perry is making a mess.’

Example 2: mirror or window?

‘That woman’s dress is not buttoned up.’

‘My dress is not buttoned up.’

Demonstratives or demonstrative expressions: ‘that’ or ‘this man’, accompanied by pointing. Directly referential, cf. referential use of definite descriptions: pointing picks out a referent.

Example of a problem:

‘That fox is making a terrible mess in my garden.’ (true or false when the speaker points at a badger making a mess?)

Suggested reading

Introductory:

Jaszczolt 2002, ch 7

For definitions of the relevant terms see also *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (free online access) and *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 2006, 2nd edition, ed. K. Brown, Oxford: Elsevier. Available online on: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/referenceworks/9780080448541> (from computers connected to the university system)

Advanced/detailed:

Frege 1892

Kripke 1979

Jaszczolt 2010