

STUDIES IN PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE
AND LINGUISTICS 2

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Philosophical and Linguistic Analyses of Reference



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Introduction: Philosophical and Linguistic Analyses of Reference

The Morning Star is a body illuminated by the Sun.
Gottlob Frege “On Sense and Reference” (1892)

One of the most basic questions for philosophy of language, for linguistics (especially semantic and pragmatic theory, but also theories of discourse), and for philosophy of mind is: what is the link between words, the world, and the mind? These questions are concerned with, to use Tyler Burge’s phrase, “the referential actions of language users” (cf. Burge 1973: 439). Reference, together with truth and meaning, belongs to the foundational concepts of philosophy of language (and philosophy as a whole), and has from the beginning constituted the core of research within analytic philosophy;¹ some more recent studies shift the analyses of reference towards the even more complex relations between reference and cognition and cognitive development.²

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- 1 Cf. Scott Soames, according to whom, the foundational concepts of philosophy of language, the “midwife of the scientific study of language, and language use” are “truth, reference, meaning, possibility, propositions, assertion, and implicature” (Soames 2010: 1). This is, however, far from claiming that these concepts are not controversial, see for example Kemp (2012) for a recent discussion of truth, reference, and meaning in the competing approaches advocated by W.V.O. Quine and Donald Davidson. Kemp provides support for Quine’s position and works out an account of language and meaning which avoids the problematic uses of concepts of truth and reference.
 - 2 Contemporary literature on reference is too vast to even mention; see, however, Bianchi (2015) for a concise recent overview of contemporary research on reference, especially within philosophy of language; see also Hawthorne and Manley (2012) on the relations between the semantic phenomenon of reference and the cognitive phenomenon of singular thought. According to Hawthorne and Manley (2012: 3) “The discovery of the twin categories of reference and singular thought is widely felt to be one of the landmark achievements of twentieth-century analytic philosophy”. Further on, studies gathered in García-Carpintero and Martí (eds.) (2014) investigate the problem of empty reference and thought. See also the contributions in Gundel and Hedberg (eds.) (2008) for essays examining reference from the perspective of philosophy, cognitive

In the long tradition of research on reference within the analytic paradigm two approaches have been immensely influential: the earlier one, proposed by Gottlob Frege, and further developed by such philosophers as Bertrand Russell and Peter Strawson, on the one hand, and philosophers, logicians and mathematicians such as Rudolf Carnap, Alonzo Church, and Richard Montague, on the other. The more recent stance, counter Fregean, originated with Saul Kripke's work, and has been advocated by, among others, Keith Donnellan, David Kaplan, John Perry, and Hilary Putnam.³ In somewhat oversimplified terms it might be claimed that in the Fregean account (and in most varieties of contemporary formal semantics) what "a linguistic expression refers to depends (...) on the mental state of the speaker who uses it" (Bianchi 2015: 2); in contrast, the Kripkean approach highlights "the crucial role played by worldly historical facts that may be unknown to the speaker" (Bianchi 2015: 2). As observed by García-Carpintero (1998: 40): "Fregean Reference and Kripkean Reference are modal claims; they are claims about which properties are linguistically essential for the semantical individuation of the actual and potential utterances constituting a given language (or system of thoughts)". Fregean Reference is the claim that reference is an extrinsic semantic property, whereas Kripkean Reference is the claim that reference is intrinsic.

Papers in this volume provide philosophical and linguistic analyses of several different aspects of reference. The topics discussed include types of reference, problems of identity, indexicality, reference fixing and descriptions. Other issues concern events and the event-argument hypothesis, predicate reference, definite descriptions, contextualism, types of quantifications, faultless disagreement, vagueness, reference in minimalism (in the context of model theoretic semantics and generative grammar), and the reference system for coding spatial information in Hausa. Individual chapters discuss various aspects of the approaches proposed by Gottlob Frege, Donald Davidson, Saul Kripke, Michael Devitt and Kim Sterelny, and contribute to the vivid debate on reference in contemporary philosophy of language and linguistics.

Richard Gaskin discusses identity and reference in a 'Black Universe'. He observes that the principle of the identity of indiscernibles states that objects with the same properties are identical, further on he focuses on Max Black's famous thought experiment, in which two iron spheres supposedly exist in an otherwise empty universe (cf. Black 1952). The thought experiment is often thought to raise

psychology, theoretical and computational linguistics, and Abbott (2010) for an introduction to reference in philosophy and linguistics.

3 See García-Carpintero (1998) and the references therein, for a thorough comparison of Fregean and Kripkean theories of reference.

problems for the principle of the identity of indiscernibles and for the bundle theory of substance. Gaskin argues that these difficulties can be surmounted, and that interesting versions of both the identity of indiscernibles and the bundle theory survive subjection to the test of the Black universe. By contrast, Black's thought experiment does raise a difficulty for the thesis that distinct objects must be referentially discriminable. The contribution ends by discussing, but not solving, this latter problem.

Ulrich Reichard and Wolfram Hinzen provide a critical review of the event-argument hypothesis. They observe that the Davidsonian event-arguments have become widely accepted in the philosophy of language and are a standard tool in formal semantics today. Furthermore, the authors show that the linguistic data which have centrally motivated the assumption of event-arguments are all predicted and explained on the basis of independently motivated grammatical assumptions, without any ontological or lexical-semantic stipulations required. The semantic assumption that verbs are names of events viewed as entities in the world creates no explanatory benefits, and they suggest that it also creates explanatory problems. Reichard and Hinzen conclude, at least for the case of reference to events, that the formal ontology of natural language has a foundation in a grammatical mode of cognizing reality, not in anything intrinsic to the lexical semantics of verbs or to reality viewed as independent of a linguistic format of cognition. Reference to events, like other forms of reference such as reference to objects or propositions, is not grounded in what exists out there but in how language, as grammatically structured, allows us to engage in referential acts of language use based on the lexical concepts we possess.

Luis Fernández Moreno considers the issue of reference fixing and descriptions. He observes that according to Kripke and Putnam a natural kind term can be introduced ostensively or descriptively but since the ostension by itself is ambiguous it requires some sort of descriptive supplementation. In this regard it is advisable to determine more precisely what sort of descriptive components are involved in the ostensive reference fixing of natural kind terms and thus how much *descriptive* content is to be included in the descriptions involved in that sort of reference fixing. This question has been dealt with explicitly by Devitt and Sterelny (1999). Fernández Moreno focuses on Devitt's and Sterelny's theory of reference fixing by ostension of natural kind terms, and the main aim of his article is to examine and develop their view about the descriptive components required for the ostensive reference fixing of natural kind terms.

Eduardo Garcia-Ramirez discusses externalism, surrogate reference, and empty kind terms. According to the externalist view of content, the content of referential

terms, whether proper or common nouns, proper names or kind terms, cannot be determined solely in terms of the internal or psychological properties of individual speakers. An external, non-individualistic psychological condition is needed. Thanks to Putnam (1975) and Kripke (1980) externalism became the orthodox view. More recently, however, Boghossian (1997) and Segal (2000) have offered parallel arguments against externalist accounts of content. Actual non-empty names may very well have an extension as part of their content, yet they may lack such an extension *counterfactually*. If we consider such worlds in which they lack an extension, we will realize they still have content. This is either because the concept changes its truth-conditions to ‘motley’ ones (Segal) or because it changes its structure from atomic to complex (Boghossian), without an external condition accounting for the difference. Garcia-Ramirez argues that the externalist replies available have failed to offer a satisfactory account. He also presents an alternative account based on the notion of *surrogate reference* and shows how it offers a more satisfactory externalist account of empty names and empty kind terms.

Gregory Bochner investigates essential indexicality without self-location. He argues that two different problems were conflated under the common label of “the problem of the essential indexical”. It is usually supposed that there is a problem of the essential indexical arising specifically for *de se* attitudes, as opposed to *de dicto* and *de re* attitudes, and furthermore that this *same* problem undermines the traditional view according to which belief is a binary relation between a subject (at some time) and a classical proposition. As against this identification, which has fed much of the recent scepticism about essential indexicality, Bochner proposes to replace the first claim by another one: that there is a problem of the essential indexical arising specifically for *de re* attitudes (including *de se* attitudes) as opposed to *de dicto* attitudes. In contrast to the problem evoked in the original claim, which is a problem of cognitive significance, the redefined problem is claimed to be a problem of semantic significance: the *common alternatives* of different subjects cannot always correspond to possible worlds. Assuming the standard Fregean criterion of difference for contents, this problem shows that indexical belief, *even when it is not egocentric*, cannot in general be reduced to propositional belief. Finally, Bochner suggest that the solution to that problem is to invoke worlds of evaluation which can be centered directly on objects of acquaintance.

Joanna Odrowąż-Sypniewska focuses on faultless disagreement as it appears in disputes involving predicates of personal taste and other vague predicates. She proposes a contextualist conception of vagueness that combines indexical and nonindexical contextualism. The problem with contextualism concerning vague assertions is that it seems that while indexical contextualism makes impossible any

genuine disagreement concerning ascriptions of vague properties to objects, non-indexical contextualism either makes *faultless* disagreement concerning borderline cases impossible or else it leads to indexical contextualism. Odrowąż-Sypniewska offers a new account of unidimensional personal taste predicates with a suggestion to model all vague predicates on them. The idea is that in clear cases “*a* is *F*” means “*a* is *F simpliciter*”, whereas in borderline cases it means “*a* is *F*-according-to-me”. She also addresses two possible objections: that faultless disagreement is spurious on my account and that the idea that assertions concerning borderline and clear cases have different contents is *ad hoc*.

Geoff Georgi is concerned with quantifying-in uses of complex demonstratives and the semantics of quantification. He observes that the semantics of complex demonstratives raises questions at the intersection of very general philosophical investigations into both reference and quantification. According to King (2001), direct reference theories of complex demonstratives cannot account for an occurrence of a complex demonstratives containing pronouns or variables bound by quantifiers taking wide scope over the occurrence. Yet King’s own semantics for complex demonstratives as quantifiers can be changed, in a surprisingly straightforward way, into a semantics according to which free occurrences of complex demonstratives relative to contexts of referential uses are directly referential. This supports Salmon’s (2006 a, b) response to King’s argument, according to which King’s argument trades on differences between bound and free occurrences of variables and other expressions. Assessing the alternative to King’s semantics raises very general questions about both the nature of quantification and the role quantification plays in a compositional semantic theory. In his contribution, Georgi defends a modified referential thesis: a complex demonstrative relative to the context of a referential use is directly referential.

Massimiliano Vignolo returns to the issue of definite descriptions and contextualism, and he presents a contextualist theory of the attributive/referential distinction in the use of definite descriptions. His theory treats referential interpretations of definite descriptions as strengthened meanings. The idea is that the compositional system that computes the proposition said generates the referential interpretations by default, guided by the principle that referential interpretations are stronger than attributive ones. The compositional system backtracks to attributive interpretations whenever the context does not allow the referential interpretation to be carried out. The Strengthened Meaning Theory offers a systematic and principled explanation of the process that generates referential or attributive interpretations of definite descriptions keeping the attributive/referential distinction at the level of the proposition expressed and avoiding both the Gricean strategy and semantic ambiguity.

Gabriele M. Mras looks at Frege's essay "On Sense of Reference" from the perspective of providing an adequate definition of number. Throughout Frege's working life the goal to prove arithmetic to be objective was central to all of his writing. Mras examines the extent to which what Frege says about *Sinn* has to be understood against this background, she also compares the ideas presented in *Begriffsschrift*, "Funktion und Begriff" and "Über Sinn und Bedeutung". Mras observes that certain objections to how *Sinn's* expressing a 'mode' in which an object is 'presented' can be resolved given that the identity sign is included into the expression of a function. Finally, she argues that the role of *Sinn* rests on the very particular objects we refer to when we use numerals in order to identify objects.

Stefan Riegelnik is concerned with the very idea of predicate reference. After discussing the problem of predication and Russell's contribution to the debate, he moves on to Donald Davidson, who links two questions: how to account for the semantic role of predicates and how to account for the unity of a sentence or a proposition. Davidson (2005) dedicates ample room to the discussion of failed accounts and from this discussion he works out a list of conditions to be met by any theory of predication. In a review essay of *Truth and Predication*, Tyler Burge criticises Davidson's discussion of failed accounts. Most notably, he blames Davidson for not distinguishing between *singular reference* and *predicate reference* or *singular-denotation* and *predicative-denotation* respectively. In this chapter, Riegelnik argues that the Burge's notion of predicate reference and the reasons for its introduction remain in the dark. Consequently, the appeal to *predicate reference* is of no help when it comes to explaining the semantic role of predicates.

The last two chapters concentrate on the nature of reference in formal linguistics and in language analysis. Jarosław Jakielaszek discusses the minimalist roots of reference and the status of model theoretic semantics vis-à-vis generative grammar, whereas Nina Pawlak analyses the discourse properties of the reference system for coding spatial information in Hausa. In the concluding lines of an often quoted paper on meaning and reference Hilary Putnam observed that "Traditional semantic theory leaves out two contributions to the determination of reference – the contribution of society and the contribution of the real world; a better semantic theory must encompass both" (Putnam 1973: 711). Pawlak's paper shows the importance of appropriate contextual analysis.

Jarosław Jakielaszek stresses that despite their widespread use in formal semantics, the status of model theoretic methods within the generative theory of language remains unclear. Basic properties and mechanisms of model theory, widely assumed to involve modeling of the reference relation, have been subject to criticisms as relying on conceptual foundations which are unacceptable in a naturalistic

inquiry into properties of the human language faculty. A closer examination of the concept of domain and of mechanisms linking objects in the domain with symbols of the object language, clarifying the limitations of model theoretic methods, highlights both the necessity of formal tools modeling the reference relation and their possible relevance for understanding the nature of syntactic features, unvalued formal features in particular. Jakielaszek concludes that the search for the roots of reference, insofar as it falls within the domain of linguistic inquiry, should uncover the basic mechanism enabling the interpretation to link syntactic expressions with objects in the domain and find its syntactic – in the minimalist sense – basis.

Nina Pawlak investigates the system for coding spatial information in Hausa. She focuses on three types of terms that are used to express the oppositional meanings: FRONT–BACK, as in ‘front/back of the house’, LEFT–RIGHT, as in ‘left/right side’, and HERE–THERE in the function of spatial adverbials. The lexical equivalents of these notions (*gaba – baya*; (*hannun*) *hagu – (hannun) baya*, and *nan – can*, respectively) have diverse meanings and their proper understanding is provided through the given context. The contextual analysis of these exponents in different types of texts shows that there is a correlation of meanings expressed by spatial terms and of the basic distinction between oral and written discourse in respect to reference frames, points of spatial reference and the way particular terms are used in communication. The data extracted from written sources are used by Pawlak to compare the function of spatial terms in examples of Hausa oral narratives and in modern literary texts. The analysis leads to the conclusion that in oral communication, the conceptualization of spatial relations is based on a person-oriented system of reference, whereas in written types of discourse it is an object-oriented system that determines the choice of the reference frame and the use of a proper equivalent.

Contributions gathered in this volume attest to the vividness and richness of the debate on reference in contemporary philosophy of language and linguistics; hopefully, they illuminate at least some of the perennial problems of reference.⁴

4 The issue of reference is closely connected with that of proper names, see, among others, the foundational remarks in Burge (1973) and Kripke (1980); see also Longobardi (1994; 2005), who integrates philosophical and linguistic findings within a cross-linguistic perspective. Some aspects of philosophical approaches to proper names are investigated in an accompanying volume, Stalmaszczyk and Fernández Moreno (eds.) (2016).

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