Pragmatics I, and Complexities of Referring Expressions

Read Portner, pp. 24-25; 78-99
Semantic Meaning vs. Speaker Meaning

• A: Most of the people here seem pretty glum.
• B: Not everybody. The man drinking champagne is happy.
• A: Where?
• B: That guy! (pointing)
• A: He’s not drinking champagne. He’s drinking sparkling water. The only person drinking champagne is crying on the couch. See?
• B: Well, what I meant was that the first guy is happy.
• The **semantic meaning** of a sentence is its literal meaning, based on what the words individually mean and the grammar of the language.

• The **speaker’s meaning** of a sentence is what the speaker intends to communicate by uttering it.

• These often coincide, but can diverge.
  – Irony, metaphor, short cuts, etc.
    • “The people remember Tianmen Square.”

• Semantics studies semantic meaning, and pragmatics studies speaker’s meaning.
Humpty Dumpty

“…There’s glory for you!”
“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory’,” Alice said.
Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t--till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knockdown argument for you’.”
“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knockdown argument’,” Alice objected.
“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less.”
“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”
“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master--that’s all.”
Definite NPs

• (1) Nicky is cute.
• (2) The cat (that lives at Nancy’s house) is cute.

• The cat is cute:
  – Quantificational theory of definite article (Russell)
    • \( [[\text{the cat is cute}]^M = 1 \text{ iff for some } d \in U, [[\text{cat}]]^M = \{d\} \text{ and } d \in \{x: x \text{ is cute in } M\} \).
    • \( \exists x [\text{cat}(x) \land \forall y[\text{cat}(y) \rightarrow y=x] \land \text{cute}(x)] \)

  – Referential theory of definite article
    • \( [[\text{the cat}]]^M = \text{Nicky} \)
    • \( [[\text{the cat is cute}]^M = 1 \text{ iff Nicky } \in \{x: x \text{ is cute in } M\} \)
Sense and Reference

• *The cat that lives at Nancy’s house*
  – **Sense**: a rule or procedure that tells us that, given the facts as they actually are (the actual world), the NP refers to Nicky; but given the facts in an alternative scenario (another possible world), it would refer to Teddy, or Ramona.
  – **Reference**: Nicky.
    • The reference is the compositionally relevant aspect of the meaning.
    • It is the reference that must be a member of the set denoted by the VP.
  – *Nicky and the cat that lives at Nancy’s house* have the same reference, but different sense
    • Do proper names even have sense? (stay tuned)
Salience

- Another thing we know about the sense is that the referent of *the cat that lives at Nancy’s house* must be the most prominent one at the time the words are used.
  - Suppose I have two cats (Nicky and Fritz). Nicky is outside and another cat (a big one) approaches him. Nicky starts to hiss.
    - One of you says to another one of you: “Look. The cat that lives at Nancy’s house is getting upset”
    - The definite NP in this context refers to Nicky even though I have two cats. Nicky is the *salient* cat that lives at my house.

- The **sense** of *the cat that lives at Nancy’s house* specifies that, in a world where there is a unique animal which is a cat living at Nancy’s house and which is salient in a context of use, the phrase refers to this animal.
Presupposition

• What if I have two cats and both are outside with us, but neither is more salient than the other? Or what if in fact I don’t have a cat?
  – Referential theory of definiteness:
    • “The cat that lives at Nancy’s house” won’t refer to anything, and the sentence “The cat that lives at Nancy’s house is cute” won’t be computable and won’t express a proposition (hence won’t have a truth value).
    • Existence and uniqueness are presuppositions.
  – Russell’s quantificational theory of definiteness:
    • The sentence will be false.
    • Existence and uniqueness are entailments.
Indefinite NPs

• A dog arrived. The dog wanted some water.
  – Quantificational Theory: Indefinite article works like an existential quantifier:
    • ∃x [dog(x) ∧ arrived(x)]
  – Referential Theory: Indefinite article doesn’t mean anything.
    • A dog just introduces a new entity (variable) into the discourse, which is said to be a dog. This entity can then be referred to again with the definite NP.
• Irene Heim: Novelty-familiarity condition
  – Indefinites introduce new entities, definites refer to existing ones.
  – These conditions are presuppositions.
Names as Concealed Descriptions

“Don’t stand there chattering to yourself like that,” Humpty Dumpty said, looking at her for the first time, “but tell me your name and your business.”

“My name is Alice, but—”

“It’s a stupid name enough!” Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. “What does it mean?”

“Must a name mean something?” Alice asked doubtfully.

“Of course it must,” Humpty Dumpty said with a short laugh. “My name means the shape I am—and a good handsome shape it is too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape almost.”
• Perhaps *Confucius* means “the most famous Chinese philosopher”? NO!

• First argument:
  – If so, then a) and b) would mean the same thing:
    a) Confucius is the most famous Chinese philosopher.
    b) Confucius is Confucius.
    c) The most famous Chinese philosopher is the most famous Chinese philosopher.

• CONCLUSION: They must differ in sense or reference or both.
• Second argument (Kripke 1972)
  – Suppose we discover that the actual Confucius was not a philosopher at all. Rather, the real philosopher was a shy fellow and Confucius helped him out by publicizing his ideas to the rest of the world, but also allowing the world to believe that he (Confucius) was responsible for the ideas.
  – We would intuitively say that “Confucius is the most famous Chinese philosopher” is false.
  – But the description theory wrongly implies that the name refers to the guy from whom credit was stolen, and leads us to predict that the sentence in a) above is true, and is just as trivial as b) and c).
  – CONCLUSION: Confucius is not synonymous with the most famous Chinese philosopher.
• We can run that argument with any description proposed as the meaning of a proper name:
  1) \( N \text{ is the } X \) doesn’t mean the same thing as \( N \text{ is } N \) or \( \text{the } X \text{ is the } X \).
  2) Supposing that \( N \) is not described by \( X \), \( N \text{ is the } X \) would intuitively be false, but it shouldn’t be if \( N \) means \( \text{the } X \).

• Perhaps it’s not possible to consider that \( N \) was not an \( X \), i.e. \( X \) is an essential property of the thing named by \( N \).
  – But this doesn’t seem plausible in general, although it might work for \( \text{Humpty Dumpty} \).

• CONCLUSION: Names lack a descriptive sense—the reference of a name is all there is to its meaning.
Names as Directly Referential: the Causal Chain Theory

- If a name lacks descriptive content, then how can we explain the link between the name and the thing it names?
- (Kripke): When Confucius was born, his parents looked at him and said, “We will call this baby ‘Confucius’” By virtue of their direct contact with him, and this act of naming, they were able to use the name Confucius to refer to the child. After that various other people met baby Confucius, and they learned his name from the parents. As they did this, they borrowed the ability to refer to the baby with the name from his parents’ original act of naming. In turn, other people learned the name from these people, and so on. Confucius learned and used his own name, and then others learned his name from him.
- This chain of links from name-user to name-user ultimately extends from Confucius’ parents down through history to us today.
Referential and Attributive Readings of Definite Descriptions

• Portner’s Fregean theory: Definites refer but their descriptive content is part of how they refer: a definite refers to the unique most salient thing which its common noun part describes.

• Bertrand Russell: Definite descriptions do not refer at all, rather they are quantificational:
  – *The teacher is nice* is true if and only if (i) there is one and only one (relevant) teacher and (ii) everyone who is a (relevant) teacher is also nice.
  – The descriptive quality is the fundamental aspect of its meaning. Definites never get around to actually referring.

• Donnellan (1966): Definites can have either a descriptive (attributive) use or a referential use.
• Scenario #1 (referential):
  – ...suppose that Jones has been charged with Smith’s murder and has been placed on trial. Imagine that there is a discussion of Jones’s odd behavior at the trial. We might sum up our impressions of his behavior by saying, “Smith’s murderer is insane.” If someone asks to whom we are referring, by using this description, the answer here is “Jones”.
    • Note that Smith’s murderer would still refer to Jones even if he is actually innocent. It just matters that the hearer figures out who the speaker wants to talk about. (This doesn’t actually fit Portner’s Fregean story).

• Scenario #2 (attributive):
  – ...we come upon poor Smith foully murdered. From the brutal manner of the killing and the fact that Smith was the most lovable person in the world, we might exclaim “Smith’s murderer was insane.” I will assume, to make it a simpler case, that in a quite ordinary sense we do not know who murdered Smith (though this is not in the end essential to the case).
    • Smith’s murderer means the same as whoever murdered Smith, a descriptive-quantificational thing, like in Russell’s theory.
Speaker’s Reference and Semantic Reference

• Kripke (1977) notes that Donnellan doesn’t say what he means by *use* in the referential use and the attributive use. But it doesn’t seem like an ordinary case of semantic ambiguity.
• Rather, definites have a single semantic meaning, perhaps like the one proposed by Russell.
• The ability of definites to refer comes from their pragmatics.
• Speakers can even use a definite to refer to one thing (speaker’s reference), while the semantics means something else (semantic reference).
  – E.g. like when a flight attendant says, “14B wants coffee”.
Plurals (Link 1983)

• The meaning of a common noun like *horse* is a property, and can be modeled as a function from possible worlds to the set of horses in each world.
  
  - \( w_1 \rightarrow \{A, B\} \)
  - \( w_2 \rightarrow \{B, C\} \)
  - \( w_3 \rightarrow \{A,B,C\} \)
  - \( w_4 \rightarrow \emptyset \)

• To describe plural noun phrases, we define a *sum* of individuals. Any two individuals A and B can be summed to make a plural individual A+B. This plural individual has A and B as *parts*. The meaning of the plural noun *horses* is the set of plural individual made up of horses
  
  - The meaning of *horses* in \( w_3 = \{A+B, B+C, A+C, A+B+C\} \)
A, B, and C are *atoms* of this part-whole structure, a *lattice*. A+B is the *join* of A and B. A and B are the *parts* of A+B. How many parts A+B+C has depends on how you look at it.
• Plural noun phrases are often modified by numerals: *the three horses*.

• *Three* can be thought of as a kind of adjective: it combines with *horses*, and the resulting predicate describes any plural individual which is described by *horses* and which has three atomic parts.

• **horse**  
  A property which describes any individual horse.

• **horses**  
  A property which describes any plural individual consisting of horses.

• **three horses**  
  A property which describes any plural individual described by *horses* with three atomic parts.

• **the three horses**  
  Refers to the unique most salient thing described by *three horses*.

• \{A, B, C\}  
  \{A+B, B+C, A+C, A+B+C\}

• \{A+B+C\}  
  A+B+C
• Many languages, like Chinese, don’t distinguish singular from plural nouns.
• Emmon Bach suggests that nouns in these languages cover both atomic and non-atomic individuals, gathering together everything that in English is described by horse and horses.
  – The meaning of horse (ma) in w3 would be \{A, B, C, A+B, A+C, B+C, A+B+C\}
  – To count the number of atoms, Chinese uses classifiers (measure words):
    • san pi ma
      three CL horse
    • san indicates that we are counting three atoms
    • pi indicates that these atoms are large-animal sized
    • ma indicates that their nature is that of horse-hood.
Mass Terms (Link 1983)

• Mass terms like gold are associated with lattice structures like horse(s).
  – However, as far as our linguistic conception of things goes, one can always theoretically divide a piece of gold into smaller pieces.
  – There are no basic elements or (linguistic) atoms, (There are of course chemical atoms but this isn’t built into linguistic structure)
  – An English mass noun like gold is somewhat like Chinese ma.
    • The lattice does not classify the totality of individuals into atoms and non-atoms, although of course the Chinese ma lattice does contain atoms while gold does not.
    • More similar to Chinese ma is the English mass term furniture, which is conceptualized as containing basic units. To count furniture we use a classifier-like word such as piece: three pieces of furniture.
• There are relationships between the count and the mass domains.
  – Consider the mass noun gold and the count noun ring.
  – Each gold ring is made up of some gold, so there is a connection or “mapping” between the gold and the rings.
  – This mapping preserves the internal structure of the ring domain:
    • If we have two rings R1 and R2, made up of gold G1 and G2, the plural individual R1+R2 (i.e. those rings) is made up of G1+G2 (i.e. that gold).
  – But it is necessary to distinguish between the gold G1 and the ring R1 since they can have different properties:
    • the ring can be new, but the gold old, for instance.
  – But they have a very intimate relationship: the gold comprises the ring.