Lecture Six: Russell and Definite Descriptions

Philosophy 431
October 1, 2015

I. Administrative
A. Announcements: Schedule change, details about ambiguity coming soon
B. General Questions?

II. Reviewing Frege
A. The view in a picture
B. Confusions and questions
   1. Proper knowledge and actual knowledge – talk about this today
   2. Difference between $a$ and $b$ as signs vs. as objects
   3. Role of ideas
   4. Contexts small and large
   5. Relation to German

III. Methodological matters
A. Direct and indirect arguments
   1. One can make direct arguments for a semantic proposal by serving up reasons that establish the theoretical virtues of the proposal simpliciter.
      a. One way to do this by starting with data and then extracting necessary and sufficient conditions from that data that support an explanatory hypothesis about how those data work.
      b. This is a common strategy in contemporary philosophy of language and linguistic semantics.
   2. One can also make indirect arguments by establishing that if the proposal is true, then certain other problems or challenges that bear directly on the data would be solved.

B. In the history of philosophical semantics, indirect arguments have been
the primary order of business, setting the agenda and motivating theoretical maneuvers.

C. Many critical arguments against semantic proposals are driven by semantic problems that critics claim it cannot surmount.

IV. Reference as meaning: One more time

A. Since representational meaning is clearly on display in referential relations between language and the world, take this to be the *paradigmatic type of meaning* and use this to analyze all other meaning relations (e.g., naming, designation, denotation, connotation) as more or less central.

B. *Argument for the Referential Theory of Meaning (RTM):*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P1. Meaning is representation.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P2. Representation consists of one thing (viz., the <em>representation</em>) standing for another thing (viz., the <em>represented</em>).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3. Reference is the relation that makes representation so understood possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4. Thus, reference makes meaning possible (P1, P3).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C. Therefore, meaning must be analyzed in terms of reference.

C. *Developing RTM*

1. In the RTM, certain types of terms are going to be prototype cases. These are the *singular terms*, i.e., things like names, pronouns, and definite descriptions that refer to particular things.

2. If RTM is to succeed as a general ToM, it surely must in the first instance work at home in its prototype cases.

3. This is why *definite descriptions* have been such a battleground for semanticists over the years. These are included as prototype cases, but there are good reasons to believe that these do not function as referring terms.

4. Russell: “I would give the doctrine of this *word* [the] if I were “dead from the waist down” and *not merely in a prison.*”

5. Thus, much of semantics over the past 120 years or so has focused on making sense out of this category of term, since success here could ramify into success everywhere. (Even if you don’t have these
aspirations, it would still seem to be the case that reference is going
to be important to a ToM even if the ToM isn’t an instance of RTM,
but even this is threatened by the critique of definite descriptions.)

III. Problems for RTM

A. Reference is not necessary

1. Not all words name or refer to something (e.g., ‘a’, ‘sake’).

2. Words that would appear to be referential can be meaningful without
there existing anything to which they refer (e.g., ‘Beowulf’).

3. Sentences can be meaningful that deny reference, either explicitly or
implicitly.

B. Reference is not sufficient

1. If reference were sufficient, you should be able to line up the
referents, Gulliver’s Travels-style, and get sentential meanings. But
that underspecifies such meanings, since there are many things such a
collection could mean. Something more is needed.

2. Identity statements can be significant (e.g., “Cicero is Tully”), but if
the meaning of a name is simply its referent, this cannot be explained.
“Cicero is Tully” would be identical in meaning on this account to
“Cicero is Cicero”.

3. If meaning were just reference, then phenomena involving
substitution in opaque contexts would have no explanation. For
example, if RTM is true, then there should be no problem substituting
co-referring names in belief contexts, but clearly there is.

IV. Russell and the Modification of RTM

A. What look like referring terms really aren’t referring terms at all.

1. The locus classicus for this move is “On Denoting”, in which
Russell argues that linguistic appearances can be misleading, and
that the “logical form” of meaningful sentences involving apparent
referring terms can reveal a very different reality

2. In particular, definite descriptions—once taken to be a hallmark
singular referring term—do not even exist at the level of logical
form! They are analyzed away into conditions that are fully general
and quantificational. (E.g., …)
3. Beyond this, Russell recommends a version of what some have called the “Name Claim”, according to which the appearance/reality confusion extends to proper names. They are taken to be equivalent in meaning to definite descriptions, and so do not exist at logical form either.

4. **Russell's Argument:**

   P1. If “the φ is Ψ” (S) is a S/P sentence and is significant, then ‘the φ’ must have a referent.

   P2. But it is not the case that ‘the φ’ must have a referent.

   3. Therefore, it is not the case that S is both a S/P sentence and is significant.

   4. That is, it must either be the case that S is not a S/P sentence or that it is not significant.

   P5. S is significant.

   C. Therefore, S must not be a S/P sentence.

B. What results isn’t really a version of RTM, although it is clearly influenced by it. The theory as such can avoid the various problems, especially when supplemented by the Name Claim.

1. Empty names

2. Informative identities

3. Non-existence claims

C. **Problems with the view:**

1. Russell’s theory implies falsehood where there should be failure of truth value altogether, e.g., in the non-referential cases like “The present King of France is bald.”

2. Russell’s theory does not take into consideration context, and so cannot be extended to cover indefinite definite descriptions.

3. Russell gets the *attributive* use correct, but cannot handle the *referential* use of definite descriptions.

4. The view struggles to capture data involving anaphora, plural definite descriptions, or generic uses of definite descriptions.