Reconstruction

In chapter one of his book Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction, William Lycan discusses The Referential Theory of Linguistics (RTL). This theory attempts to explain how linguistic expressions hold the meanings that they do. According to the RTL, "linguistic expressions have the meanings they do because they stand for things; what they mean is what they stand for" (Lycan, 3). Another way to look at this is seeing words as a sort of stand-in for the real thing. For example, the noun "turtle" refers to the class of turtles that exist in the real world. That is, the word "turtle" derives its meaning from the actually existing animals.

Lycan discusses three objections to the RTL, and I will overview and respond to the first.

The first objection seems obvious enough, and that is that we have meaningful linguistic expressions that refer to things that do not actually exist in the world. Examples he gives include Pegasus and the Easter Bunny. Because a theory of linguistics should account for all instances of linguistic utterances (or words) and their corresponding meaning in order to be sufficient, Lycan asserts that the RTL fails as a theory of linguistics. His argument in standard form might look something like this:

P1. The Referential Theory states that linguistic expressions have meaning because they stand for things that exist in the world (or objects).
P2. For the Referential Theory to sufficiently explain linguistics, it must account for all instances of linguistic utterances (or words) and their corresponding meaning.
P3. It is possible for a linguistic utterance to have meaning without it having to represent or correspond to anything in the real world (e.g. Pegasus).

C. Given (P1)–(P3), The Referential Theory is not a sufficient theory to explain linguistics.
While Lycan’s objection is fair and is shared by many other philosophers, a slight modification of concepts may provide the Referential Theorist a chance to defend herself.

Comment

The first premise in Lycan’s argument seems to rest on the assumption that the term *things* implies an object that takes up space in the physical world (e.g. chairs, Mom, etc). It is possible, it seems, to broaden this definition. After all, couldn’t it be the case that concepts exist as *things* in the real world? For example, one might be inclined to say that the concept of “good” exists in the actual world. Obviously “good” is not an object that exists, but rather a concept. This argument in standard form might look something like this:

P1. (P1) in Lycan’s argument seems to rest on the assumption that the term “things” implies an object that takes up physical space in the world (e.g. chairs, Mom, etc).

P2. It is possible to broaden the definition of “things” to include those things that exist in the world without taking up physical space (e.g. concepts).

P3. In Lycan’s argument, (P1) must be true in order for his conclusion to follow.

C. If (P2), Lycan’s conclusion doesn’t follow.

Debating the definition of a term such as “things” may not be the avenue a philosopher of linguistics wants to take. However, if one wishes to respond to Lycan’s first objection to RTL, this is a possible approach.

I like the argument, & it does represent a start, but what would explain why one term — say, ‘horse’—refers to a class of objects & another, similar term—say, ‘unicorn’—refers to a concept, which is entirely different? Why not just go Locke & have the concept/idea be the thing?

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1 One could also apply this argument to the term “exists”, though that may be a far bigger philosophical project.
Lycan's Objection #1 to the Referential Theory

P1. The Referential Theory states that linguistic expressions have meaning because they stand for things that exist in the world (or objects).

P2. For the Referential Theory to sufficiently explain linguistics, it must account for all instances of linguistic utterances (or words) and their corresponding meaning.

P3. It is possible for a linguistic utterance to have meaning without it having to represent or correspond to anything in the real world (e.g. Pegasus).

C. Given (P1)-(P3), The Referential Theory is not a sufficient theory to explain linguistics.

Argument Against Lycan

To Lycan's objection, the Referential Theorist might claim the following:

P1. (P1) in Lycan's argument seems to rest on the assumption that the term "things" implies an object that takes up physical space in the world (e.g. chairs, Mom, etc).

P2. It is possible to broaden the definition of "things" to include those things that exist in the world without taking up physical space (e.g. concepts).

P3. In Lycan's argument, (P1) must be true in order for his conclusion to follow.

C. If (P2), Lycan's conclusion doesn't follow.

This is beautifully constructed. You have the argumentative approach and related very nice. The reason is still useful stuff, but the comment is still used. You had space for another & - you could...