‘Refer’ Madness: Reflections on Reference and Referring

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Reference and Referring

• Today’s talk will be an exercise in the philosophy of language
  – Reference is a relation: word/world and word/word
  – Referring is an activity: part of speech acts we perform

• I wish to consider these together and ask if there is anything to be said for an account that aims to explain them both

• After a bit of overview, I’ll present a set of positive considerations in favor of such an account, followed by reservations that point in a different direction
Goals for a Theory of Reference

• Broadly, explain and predict facts about reference and/or referring
  – Semantic account: reference in a language
  – Meta-semantic account: reference across languages

• What are we explaining?
  – How is it that words stand for other things?
  – How is it that words have currency for us in communication?
  – Main Point: How is it that word-world relations are set up and exploited for the purposes of communication?
Goals for a Theory of Reference

- *Empirical*: account for how reference/referring structures thought and behavior

  - Ability of language to organize, change, and control—words move the world; they have a “vitality” that makes them an integral part of our lives
  - Association of words/phrases with the world—they “bear or carry” us to those objects—and with other words
  - From the first-person perspective, we reach out into the world with our words—referring is something we *do*, and reference is a relation rooted in this practice
Goals for a Theory of Reference

- Conceptual: analyze the conceptual conditions associated with reference/referring

  - Identify the relation between reference and referring, and determine if they should be treated of a piece or separately, or if one or both should be ignored
  - We can think of both reference and referring relationally, motivating the need to individuate and identify the relevant relations, along with the conditions satisfied by the various things that in fact stand in them
  - Establish that the analysis passes the various experimental tests: informative identities, empty names, negative existentials, ignorant reference, etc.
  - Integrate the analysis into a broader theory of meaning and theory of language
Methodologies for a ToR

• How best to achieve these goals?

• Conceptual: Aim to identify conditions satisfied by instances of the relation
  – Bottom-up:
    • Examine sets of data involving these to determine patterns of usage
    • Pursue conditions in various experimental contexts supplied by puzzle cases, substitution instances, counterfactual circumstances
    • Appeal to intuition in identifying conditions satisfied by successful and paradigmatic cases of reference
Methodologies for a ToR

• Conceptual: Aim to identify *conditions* satisfied by instances of the relation

  – Top-down:
    • Treat reference as primitive, as in logic, and provide holistic constraints on it
    • Extract reference relation from a broader theory of meaning or theory of truth (e.g., disquotationalism)
    • Provide reason to dismiss the relation and move on
Methodologies for a ToR

- *Empirical*: aim to explain reference/ referring as a type of human behavior
  - Assimilate to psychology
  - Focus on referring as a practice
  - Emphasize the mutual, collaborative nature of referring in linguistic practice
  - Emphasize paradigm cases
Models of Reference/Referring

• Develop a *model* of reference/referring that (a) identifies their elements, (b) identifies their articulations, and (c) broadly supports our interest in explanation and prediction

• *First*: Distinguish between *ends* and *means* of reference/referring as a way of setting the context of model development

  – *Ends*: contribute something to the proposition expressed or truth condition, fix subject of discourse, locate item for listener

  – *Means*: descriptive, causal, historical, etc.
Models of Reference/Referring

- **Second**: identify the elements and articulations for each specific relation

  - *Reference*: a term X refers to item Y
    - Indirect/direct
    - Descriptive/non-descriptive
    - Causal/non-causal

  - *Referring*: an agent A refers to item Y with term X
    - Epistemic/non-epistemic
    - Intentional/non-intentional
    - Individual/mutual
Models of Reference/Referring

• *Third:* Consider whether these should be treated together or separately

  – **Pro-Unification:** “Where we are tempted to speak of ‘different senses’ of a word which is clearly not equivocal, we may infer that we are in pretty much in the dark about the character of the concept which it represents.” GEM Anscombe, *Intention*

  – **Pro-Segregation:** While there are affinities, we should keep the logical and the psychological as separate as possible.
A Unified Model: Introduction

• I’ll now sketch a model that is intended to unify the relations.

• What counts as unification?
  – Reduction of one to the other
  – Accommodation of both within a broader account
  – Not elimination of one in favor of the other

• Assumptions: Reference and referring are both substantive relations; there are stable, persistent patterns of linguistic phenomena to be modeled
A Unified Model: Relation Analysis

• In the literature, reference and referring are often characterized “semantic” vs “speaker”

• Can these be accommodated within a unified account that makes consistent sense out of both?

• Idea: unify these under a single relation

• Strategy: analyze this relation in terms of the relata first and the relation itself second:

\[ R \left( x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_n \right) \]
A Unified Model: Relation Analysis

• *One Approach*: start with a 4-place relation, and through parameterization and reduction arrive at smaller relations that capture connections among the various elements, some of which will be *semantically* relevant

• This supplies a formal model of a certain type of representational system, and parameterization allows us to focus on stable aspects that underwrite word-world relations and enable referential communication

• *The principal reductions*:

  – $R(x, y, z, w) : x \text{ refers } y \text{ to } z \text{ with } w$
  – $[y]R(x, z, w) : x \text{ refers to } z \text{ with } w$
  – $[x, y]R(z, w) : z \text{ is referred to } w \text{ (or } w \text{ refers}_{sem} \text{ to } z)$
## A Unified Model: Relation Analysis

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameterized Relation</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
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<td>[]R(x, y, z, w)</td>
<td>x REFERS y to z with w</td>
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<td>[w]R(x, y, z)</td>
<td>x REFERS y to z</td>
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A Unified Model: Relation Modeling

- **Goal**: provide a unified model of the mechanism of reference, on the assumption that its purpose is to structure discourse in a certain way.

- Given that we begin with *referring* and reduce to get *reference*, it seems reasonable to privilege the characteristics of referring over reference in modeling the relation.

- **Assumptions**: epistemic, intentional, individual—referring is something the *speaker* does intentionally, guided by knowledge; singular referring as focus.

- **Image**: aiming an arrow at a target; four stages: target identification, aiming, firing, and landing.
A Unified Model: Relation Modeling

• **Conditions:**

  – Epistemic 1: know what it is to hit a target (knowledge of success conditions for the activity)

  – Epistemic 2: know how to control the device (procedural knowledge of the device)

• **Model:** x REFERS y to z with w iff x knowingly aims w at z intending to focus the attention of y.
Concerns about Unity

• *Intrinsic Concerns*: is it the case that all of our referring to objects is intentional?
  
  – Consider the phenomenological evidence
  
  – Consider the full range of evidence (e.g., street signs, labels)
  
  – This is a very speaker-centric model that doesn’t give due weight to other players in discourse; further, it makes reference depend on speaker activity
Concerns about Unity

• *Extrinsic Concerns*: even if this is correct, is it diverse enough to accommodate all reference?
  
  – Word-world reference/referring would appear to involve more than just singular terms
  
  – Word-word reference/referring does as well: “She went running. It was a surprising thing for her to do. This changes everything.”
  
  – Ontological concerns
A Different Direction?

• Do you start with reference or finish with it? Which notion do you adopt? Do you aim for unity, or sever the two and seek independent explanations?

• Taking a cue from Wettstein, I am going to contemplate the possibility that the tensions emerging here are a sign that unification is in deep trouble

• Perhaps we should step back and start at the start, although not in a typical fashion—not by assuming that the things we are looking at should be what we look at
A Different Direction?

• Think about the contexts within which the notions of *reference/referring* are used

  – The notion is introduced to stand in for certain types of constraint placed on linguistic exchanges by participants

  – It subsumes various points around which the exchanges take place—these are the points on which attention is to be focused

  – These are *fixed* points, demonstrating a certain modal profile

  – The success of the exchanges is made to depend on how things stand with those points, although not by anyone in particular in most cases
A Different Direction?

• Consider “referential pluralism,” according to which (a) many types of devices can be used to refer, and (b) a given device can be used to refer in different ways

• Reference/referring can be made out relative to a multidimensional space within which to place a more ecumenical understanding of the concepts
Main Argument

P1. If reference and referring are related, then either we account for them with a unified model or a principled pluralist model.

P2. If a unified model, then referring > reference.

P3. If referring > reference, then unification with intentional activity.

P4. If unification with intentional activity, then (a) ubiquitous intentions, and (b) general applicability across the occurrence of the relations.

P5. Intentions are not a ubiquitous part of linguistic activity.

P6. This sort of model will not be generally applicable across the range of linguistic items that appear to have referential properties.

7. No unified model is in the offing.

C. If reference and referring are related, then we must adopt a principled pluralist model.
Thank you.