

Referential Uses and Non-Gricean Explanations

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1. In [2, 3] Devitt sets two aims. First, he argues against pragmatic explanations of referential uses of definite descriptions, according to which there are only referential uses, but no referential meanings. Second, he proposes his own, semantic explanation, to support the claim that definite descriptions have also referential meanings, not only referential uses.

I take his explanation to be semantic insofar as it (a) poses a meaning ambiguity linguistically coded into the determiner, and (b) as a consequence, it doesn't rely upon neither (b.1) the derivation of a singular proposition from a general one, nor (b.2) the construction of the referential use from the quantificational meaning. An explanation counts as pragmatic, on the other hand, when (a) it poses no meaning ambiguity (it allows only for quantificational meaning), and (b) it appeals either (b.1) to the derivation of the singular, intended proposition from some general, perhaps unintended one, or (b.2) to the construction of referential uses out of quantificational meanings (without appealing to general propositions).

2. Now, Devitt offers also a *master argument* against all pragmatic explanations, insofar as “a pragmatic explanation of referential uses *must be based on* the view that a person using a description referentially in uttering a sentence conveys a singular proposition *while saying a general quantificational proposition*” (see [4] p. 1, and also [3], p. 20; the first emphasis is ours).

I find his argument compelling, as it provides good reasons for rejecting Gricean explanations of referential uses. However, it might be a bit less general than originally intended: it seems to rest crucially on the assumption that a pragmatic explanation involves something like a Gricean derivation, and that any pragmatic position must explain the inference from the general proposition to the singular one. We said that an explanation can be pragmatic either by doing this, or by constructing referential uses out of quantificational meanings, without appealing to the expression of general propositions, or to the idea of the derivation of a singular one. Gricean explanations follow the first line. But it seems at least possible to develop an explanation that does not appeal to Gricean pragmatic machinery in accounting for referential uses, but to pragmatic processes of a different kind (these processes could also explain the attributive uses, of course, but that is not of our concern here). Pragmatic, non-Gricean explanations of referential uses are possible, and are not subject to the master argument attack. K. Bach attempts to develop such an explanation; also does S. Neale, among others. I'll try to sketch one here, that, I guess, will have much in common with these proposals.

3. One of the lessons we can draw from Devitt's [3, 4] is the need to distinguish between the quantificational meaning of a description, and the meaning of its descriptive part, or what can be called its descriptive meaning. It is not enough for an explanation to count as pragmatic that it account for referential uses in terms of descriptive meaning: it must give a key role to the whole quantificational meaning.

I'm assuming here that the main task of a pragmatic explanation is to explain how the quantificational meaning of a description, when used referentially, can help the hearer to identify the intended referent. This explanation must centrally involve the contribution of both the determiner and the descriptive component. Since the quantificational meaning of an incomplete description does not identify a unique individual, and frequently there is no way available to the speaker of completing the description, the role of this meaning must be something different: it is not to identify the referent, but to provide the hearer with enough clues so as to enable her to perform the identification.

As with every pragmatic explanation, we must provide a story for how this happens. I'll skip the part that deals with how the hearer identifies the speaker's intention of conveying a singular proposition, and concentrate on how, once this intention is recognized, the hearer uses the quantificational meaning of the description to identify the intended referent. To do this, we must take into account what clues a definite description provides, and how the hearer exploits those clues. The contribution of the determiner is to provide the clue that there is exactly one thing that is the intended referent of the speaker; the descriptive component, on the other hand, has the function of providing a set of properties by means of which the hearer can uniquely identify the relevant object, from a background of contextually salient possibilities.

4. So much for the clues. We need a brief indication of how the hearer can exploit them. One point to take into account is that cases of misdescription with seeming referential success are quite common, as Donnellan [5] pointed out; the properties in a description need not apply, for the speaker to be able to make successful reference to the intended object, nor for the hearer to make a successful identification; so, three questions can be raised:

1. **Descriptive meaning:** what is the role of the descriptive meaning of a description in the identification of the intended referent, if it need not apply to it; moreover,
2. **Context:** what notion of context is functioning here, since it is not context as usually understood; finally
3. **Salience:** what determines salience in a context.

In order to sketch an answer to these questions, I'll be borrowing a couple of terms from Skerck's [6], and talk about pragmatic and epistemic contexts of utterance. However, I'll be putting these terms to quite a different use, so I'll be importing just the expressions, not the concepts they stand for.¹ By *pragmatic*

¹The differences concern both the pragmatic and epistemic notions of context. To understand this, let's recall that there are in principle two notions of *context of utterance*: a narrow and a broad one. Roughly put, in the narrow construction, context of utterance is just a kaplanian context; in the broader sense, it includes virtually all conversationally relevant

context of utterance (PCU) I'll understand, roughly put, context of utterance as it contains all pragmatically relevant items. By *epistemic context of utterance* (ECU), I'll understand the representation of the PCU that a conversational participant has. As such, an ECU can *misrepresent* the PCU.

The discussion of referential uses of definite descriptions shows that such descriptions usually do not identify a unique individual within the PCU. What is relevant, however, for successful reference by the speaker, and successful identification by the hearer, is that the description uniquely identify an individual within the relevant ECU. Whether the speaker's or the hearer's ECU is the relevant one will depend on whether we are dealing or not with cases of misdescription, deliberate or not. This is possible if we construe the ECU as containing those aspects of PCU to which the participant has access, and the way she has access to them — if a participant thinks that an object has some property F, then, in some sense, it has F within the ECU, regardless of whether it actually has F or not; and if a participant thinks that some object is a unique F, then it is a unique F within the ECU, regardless of whether it is actually a unique F or not within the PCU.

How this notion of ECU can be put to work in order to account for successful reference and identification is relatively clear: the hearer will look within her ECU for an object that, according to her ECU, uniquely satisfies the description; all the speaker has to do is to come up with the right description to allow this identification.² Also is relatively clear how we can account for cases of misdescription or deliberate misuse: when undeliberate misdescription occurs, then either the hearer will notice it or she won't. If she does notice it, she'll try to provisionally adopt the speaker's ECU in order to perform the identification; if she doesn't notice the misdescription, she'll use her own. Something similar happens when the misdescription is deliberate.

Even though the function of the descriptive content is not to identify a unique individual within the PCU, but to enable the hearer to perform a successful identification by providing enough clues, it does so by identifying a unique individual within some relevant ECU.

5. Though the notion of ECU takes care, at least in sketch, of questions 1. and 2. above, it doesn't help in clarifying the notion of salience we need, nor does it provide an explanation of what makes a determinate object salient within a conversational context. All we can say is that if an object is salient to some conversational participant, then it is part of her ECU; we might even say, though I'm not sure about this, that conversely, an object is part of the ECU of some participant only if it is salient for her. But we need to give an independent account of salience.

I'm afraid that I don't have much to say about this, and that can be somewhat disappointing. However, if Devitt is right in this (and I think he is), then a

elements. Skerk uses 'pragmatic context of utterance' to refer to the narrow notion, whereas I have in mind the broader one. With respect to the epistemic notion of context, Skerk thinks that is a set of beliefs that are relevant to conversation, and that it's subject to full propositional specification without loss. I take it to be a representation that speaker and / or hearer have of the pragmatic context of utterance, and thus it is not restricted to beliefs; it is not fully specifiable without loss, and is not unique: speaker and hearer need not share an ECU, but might have different ECUs.

²Here 'right' can be glossed as: the description that can be used most efficiently by the hearer. If various descriptions with equal relevancy are possible, any of them will do.

suitable account of salience is required for a pragmatic explanation of referential uses to succeed. Some causal or perceptual link to an object seems necessary for it to be salient, but it is not sufficient by itself to explain referential uses. So we have to complement such an explanation with some other component: we have to show how the quantificational meaning of a description can exploit this link. Now I can only state the problem, since as yet I don't have an answer to it. For the time being, I'll have to leave the matter that way.

References

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