

# Lecture 05: Words and Things

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Facts to be explained (in order of appearance):

1. This utterance of 'Ayesha smells' depends for its truth on how Ayesha is, unlike that utterance of 'Beatrice smells'. Why?
2. This utterance of 'Charly is Charly' was less revelatory than that utterance of 'Charly is Samantha'. Why?
3. Humans successfully achieve ends by uttering words. How?
4. Communicators can know, sometimes, whether they are understanding. How?
5. Utterers make rational, voluntary use of some regularities while merely conforming to others. How is this possible?

## 1. The Story So Far

Main question: What is the relation between an utterance of a word (or phrase) and a thing when the utterance refers to the thing?

Terminology: Your *knowledge of reference* of your utterance of 'Ayesha' is that mental state, whatever it is, in virtue of which your utterance refers to Ayesha.

Why think there is any such thing as knowledge of reference? Because of two facts which stand in need of explanation:

1. Communicators can know, sometimes, whether they are understanding.
2. Utterers sometimes make rational, voluntary use of some regularities while merely conforming to others.

To explain these facts, we postulate that when either applies, there is knowledge of reference. Your knowledge of reference causes and justifies your utterance of a word or a phrase; and it determines what your utterance refers to.

When the utterance of a word refers to a thing, must the utterer have knowledge of reference?

Maybe not always (we saw an example involving incomplete mastery of a second language). But if you are making rational, voluntary use of some regularities while merely conforming to others, then knowledge of reference is needed. And if you can know whether you are understanding, then knowledge of reference is also needed.

Next question: But what could knowledge of reference be?

## 2. Sense and Knowledge of Reference

The sense of an utterance of a word (or phrase) is what you know when you have knowledge of reference.

'Frege's idea was that to understand an expression, one must not merely think of the reference that it is the reference, but that one must, in so thinking, think of the reference in a particular way. The way in which one must think of the reference of an expression in order to understand it is that expression's sense' (Evans 1985, p. 294)

What is sense supposed to do?

1. Sense explains the difference in informativeness between the utterance of 'Charly is Charly' and 'Charly is Samantha'.
2. Sense determines reference.
3. A statement showing the sense of a name specifies what you need to know about the utterance of a name in order to understand it.

Outstanding questions:

1. What is sense? That is, what do you know when you understand the utterance of a word or phrase?
2. Which mental state is knowledge of reference?

### 3. Descriptions and Determiners

‘What is the mechanism of reference? In other words, in virtue of what does a word (of the referring sort) attach to a particular object/individual?’ (Reimer & Michaelson 2018).

‘By a ‘description’ I mean any phrase of the form ‘a so-and-so’ or ‘the so-and-so’. A phrase of the form ‘a so-and-so’ I shall call an ‘ambiguous’ [i.e. indefinite] description; a phrase of the form ‘the so-and-so’ (in the singular) I shall call a ‘definite’ description. Thus ‘a man’ is an ambiguous [i.e. indefinite] description, and ‘the man with the iron mask’ is a definite description” (Russell 1963, p. 205)

“The Theory of Descriptions has a natural place within a general theory of natural language quantification in which determiners like ‘some’, ‘all’, ‘a’, ‘the’, etc. are treated as members of a unified syntactical and semantical category” (Neale 1990, p. 48)

‘If I say “Ayesha is fluffy” that is a statement of the form “x is fluffy,” and it has Ayesha for its subject. But if I say “the smelliest cat in my house is fluffy,” that is not a statement of the form “x is fluffy,” and does not have “the smelliest cat in my house” for its subject. Abbreviating the statement made at the beginning of this article, we may put, in place of “the smelliest cat in my house,” the following: “One and only one entity is the smelliest cat in my house, and that cat is fluffy” (Russell 1905, p. 488)

“if I say ‘the table is covered with books’, I do not mean to be suggesting that there is only one table in the world. Unfortunately, that seems to be precisely what the Russellian theory of descriptions is committed to” (Ludlow 2004)

‘Determiners are rare in the world’s languages [...] even in languages that deploy determiners, it is not clear that the determiners are behaving as quantificational operators. ... For example, it is plausible to think that one central function of the definite determiner is to provide genitive case when needed’ (Ludlow 2004).

‘constructions of the form ‘the F’ and ‘an F’ are not only rare in natural languages, but potentially misleading in languages like English. These expressions really don’t carry out the logical roles that Russell and subsequent authors have thought. However, Russell’s core insight remains intact: The critical question is whether the sentences in which they appear are quantificational or referential, and Russell may well be right about the critical cases here. That is, many apparently referential constructions may in fact be quantificational.’ (Ludlow 2004).

### 4. Definite Descriptions: Summary

1. A definite description is a phrase of the form ‘the so-and-so’.
2. Russell’s theory: we may put, in place of “the smelliest cat in my house,” the follow-

ing: “One and only one entity is the smelliest cat in my house, and that cat is fluffy”

3. In favour: the argument from negation
4. Objection 1: You can use definite descriptions without implying uniqueness.
5. Objection 2: Determiners do not behave like quantifier phrases.

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