Lecture 06: Words and Things

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1. Referential vs Attributive uses

"Suppose one is at a party and, seeing an interesting-looking person holding a Martini glass, one asks, "Who is the man drinking a Martini?" If it should turn out that there is only water in the glass, one has nevertheless asked a question about a particular person, a question that it is possible for someone to answer" (Donnellan 1966, p. 287).

The argument from misdescription (Donnellan's?)

1. If 'the man drinking a Martini' were quantificational, then the question would not be about anyone at all.

2. In that case it would be puzzling how the question can be answered.

3. But the question is easy to answer.

4. So the 'the man drinking a Martini' can't be quantificational.

5. Therefore it must be referential.

2. Pragmatic Aspects

A Simple Picture:

1. 1. There is a sentence

2. 2. which you utter in a context, and

3. 3. the sentence plus the context fixes what the words refer to in accordance with codifiable rules.

Example, when you utter 'I have had breakfast', your utterance of 'I' refers to you because you are the utterer.

If we accept the Simple Picture, then what utterances communicate goes beyond what any words and phrases refer to.

"In many instances, it seems that the pragmatic contribution to the proposition expressed by an utterance goes well beyond ensuring minimal propositionality." (Carston 2002, p. 22)

Neale (1990, p. 75) proposes a three-fold distinction (to which Ludlow & Neale (1991) add SG):

1. MS, the meaning of the sentence;

2. PE, the proposition expressed;

3. PM, the proposition meant;

4. SG, the speaker's grounds for making an utterance.

3. Pragmatics vs Donnellan

An alternative to Donnellan's view:

1. The PE is 'There is one and only one man drinking Martini, and he is wearing a hat'.

2. The PM is a proposition about that man (who isn't actually drinking Martini).

Given this alternative, can Donnellan's objection to Russell on descriptions be rejected on the grounds that his distinction between attributive and referential uses concerns the Proposition Meant (PM) whereas Russell's theory of descriptions is about the Proposition Expressed (PE)?

That might be too quick—it depends on how anaphoric uses of pronouns work, among other things (see Ludlow & Neale (1991)).

"The Russellian and the ambiguity theorist [i.e. Donnellan] agree that when a description is used referentially, (one of) the proposition(s) meant is object-dependent; they just provide different explanations of this fact. The referentialist complicates the semantics of 'the'; [i.e. explains it by appeal to PE] the Russellian appeals to antecedently motivated principles governing the nature of rational discourse and ordinary inference [i.e. explains it by appeal to PE]" (Neale 1990, p. 90).

4. Interim Conclusions

1. There may a distinction between MS, PE and PM.

2. In evaluating objections to Russell's theory of descriptions, we should to take this three-fold distinction into account.

3. To better understand communication with words, we probably need to characterise a distinction between MS, PE and PM.

5. The Meaning of a Sentence, the Proposition Expressed and the Proposition Meant

Two questions about MS:

1. What are the meanings of sentences?

2. Why suppose that sentences have meanings?

Two facts to be explained:

1. If someone utters a sentence and you understand her, then you will likely understand others when they utter that sentence. And conversely.

2. If a sentence is used to communicate something in one situation, then it can typically be used to communicate much the same thing in another situation.

An attempted explanation: There are some things and nearly every sentence is related to a different thing. Communicators often know which thing is related to which sentence. This knowledge (is part of what) enables them to understand utterances of those sentences.

Terminology: Call these things the 'meanings' of the sentences.

What (if anything) are these meaning things?

One idea: The meaning of a sentence is a function from contexts of utterance to propositions.

Ex: Take 'I have had breakfast' and a context of utterance in which Ayesha utters it. The meaning of this sentence takes this context of utterance to the proposition that Ayesha had breakfast.

'entities such as meanings … are not of independent interest' (Davidson 1984, p. 154)

Why suppose that there is a proposition expressed?

Two facts to be explained:

1. *Systematicity* 'there are definite and predictable patterns among the sentences [utterances of which] we understand' (Szabó 2004)

2. *Productivity* communicators can understand utterances of an indefinitely large range of sentences we have never heard before.

An attempted explanation: Words have meanings, and:

> [*Compositionality*] The meaning of a sentence (and of any complex expression) is fully determined by its structure and the meanings of its constituent words.

Why distinguish PE and PM?

1. (Assumption) MS is a function from contexts of utterances to propositions.

2. Suppose for a contradiction that PMs were the values of this function, i.e. MS + context of utterance yields PM.

3. Then Compositionality would reqiure a systematic relation between the words uttered and PM.

4. (Observation) Substituting words in an utterance can cause PM to vary dramatically, as can what happens after the utterance is over ('I've had a great evening. This wasn't it').

5. Therefore: what MS + context of utterance yields is not (always) a PM.

6. Terminology: Let PE be what MS + context of utterance yields. (Strictly speaking we need context of evaualtion too, and further complexities; see Speaks (2018).)

References

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