Mindreading and the Emergence of Reference

Manuel García-Carpintero
Grup Recerca LOGOS, Departament de Lògica, Història i Filosofia de la Ciencia
Universitat de Barcelona

Outline

- I sketch the motivation for a Descriptivist theory of how referential expressions such as proper names and indexicals work

- Semantic data exploited by rival Direct Reference theories converge with data about language acquisition to question it

- I provide some indication of how the Descriptivist view could handle the data

The Descriptivist view of Reference

- The model: "referential" uses of definite descriptions, as in:

- 'The younger cat is black', said in the context of a narrative, or in a perceptual setting

- In order to refer, the speaker relies on a way of identifying the referent given by the referential expression, shared with the audience

- Linguistic competence is not enough; it has to be supplemented with contextual inferences

Data for a rival Direct Reference view

- The audience could well reply in the previous contexts (discourse-based or perceptual):

- It is indeed black, but in fact it is not a cat, it is a small panther

- Similar data about proper names or indexicals ('that cat'); ch. 6 of Pinker's "The Stuff of Thought" has a good introduction

The Direct Reference view

- Shared identifying conceptions of the referent are not needed, and even when they are present they do not determine the referent

- The referent is rather determined by (non-conceptualized) causal-explanatory relations leading to the use of the referential expression

- However, there is no convincing DR account of the facts motivating the descriptivist view, the perspectival character of reference and reference without referents

Ancillary presuppositions vs. main speech acts

- Language allows us to split the content contained in an assertoric utterance into an "already possessed" and a "new" part, as in:

- 'It is Paolo who owns a Ferrari' vs. 'Paolo owns a Ferrari'

- This can be cashed out in terms of a norm requiring shared knowledge of the "already possessed" content

Presupposition failure

- If the norm fails, this will typically "wreck" the undertaking constituting the main speech act

- However, we can sometimes "accommodate" the speaker's failed presupposition; we may even use this for pragmatic effects, as in:

- 'That woman is very nice' – 'Yes, his partner would agree with you on that'.

- To accommodate is to temporarily accept the presuppositional content – to behave as if the presuppositional norm were satisfied

A presuppositional variation on the Descriptivist View

- Referential expressions trigger (typically, in context) presuppositions

- The presupposed content descriptively specifies who or what the referent is

- The data on which the DR account bases its criticism can be accounted for as cases of accommodation

Language acquisition and the Descriptivist Picture

- Assume that linguistic theories are "psychologically real": competent speakers are to have tacit knowledge of their claims

- On the assumption, the descriptivist view appears to require of competent speakers nothing less than a fully-fledged theory of mind

- It is a robust finding that children before 5-6 fail tests which suggest that they lack it

Facts about acquisition at odds with the Descriptivist Picture

- One such test, applied to the understanding of referential expressions:

- A utters, 'move the largest cup'; B can see three cups of different sizes in the scene, 1, 2 and 3, and also that A cannot see the largest one 3. Children below 4-5 (and autists) would move 3, instead of 2 as adults do.

- Those subjects fail thus to grasp the speaker referent. But are they not in general fully competent with referential expressions?

Views of Mindreading converging with the DR view of reference

- To avoid such consequence, Breheny (2006) provides an analysis on which the pre-theory of mind mechanisms for mindreading proposed by Tomasello, or the alternative model of Gergely & Csibra, suffice for fully competent communicative skills

- Keysar et al. (2003) argue for a similar view, on the basis of experiments (like the one above with the three cups) which show that adults also have tendencies to ignore the theory-of-mind-based reasoning

Options for the descriptivist

- Bloom (2002) provides evidence that children before they pass the false belief tests do have theory of mind precursors, which my account for referential competence

- Adults in the Keysar et al. (2003) experiments are sensitive to the descriptivist requirements

- This reflects the fact that behavior in acordance with the descriptivist requirements greatly enhances the goals of communication

The main point to take home

- These discussions about the nature of referential communication have an abstract philosophical character

- But they do have implications for language acquisition, and language evolution (see Hurford (2007), on the Origins of Noun Phrases)

- Any sufficiently complete theory of these matters should include answers to them

Thanks for your Attention