

Semantics: A Coursebook

Chapter 2: From Reference...

Unit 4: Referring Expressions

A *referring expression* is any expression used in an utterance to refer to something or someone.

An *opaque context* is a part of a sentence which can be made into a complete sentence by adding a referring expression (but the resulting sentence's meaning depends on the actual expression, not the referent). For example, *Laura Bush thinks that ... is a genius*. Such contexts are often introduced by verbs like *think*, *want*, *believe*, etc.

An *equative sentence* is one which asserts the identity of the referents of two referring expressions, like *The Morning Star is the Evening Star*. The referring expressions can be interchanged in equative sentences, but this is not a sufficient condition.

Unit 5: Predicates

The *predicator* of a simple declarative sentence is the word(s) which do(es) not belong to any of the referring expressions and which makes the most specific contribution to the meaning of the sentence.

Informally, it describes the state of or the process undergone by the referring expressions.

A *predicate* is any word or sequence of words that can function as the predicator of a sentence (in a given sense).

Predicators can be adjectives, verbs, prepositions or nouns.

The referring expressions play the roles of *arguments* in a sentence.

The *degree* of a predicate is the number of arguments it is normally understood to have in simple sentences.

Verbs can be one-, two- or three-place predicates; prepositions are usually two-place predicates (*between* is a notable exception), and adjectives and nouns are mostly one-place predicates in their simplest form.

The *identity relation* between two referring expressions asserts that they have the same referent. It is indicated by the verb *be*.

Unit 6: Predicates, Referring Expressions and Universe of Discourse

There are expressions (like proper nouns) which are almost always referring expressions, and some (like indefinite noun phrases) which may or may not be referring expressions. Predicates can be used to identify the referent.

A *generic sentence* is one in which some statement is made about a whole class of individuals, rather than any specific one.

We will expand the definition of referring expressions to include objects in imagined worlds (like *unicorn*) and non-physical, intangible things (like *tomorrow*). The *universe of discourse* for any utterance is the particular world (real or imaginary) that the speaker assumes they are talking about at the time.