

Issues in Pragmatics

PLIN3001 – PLING204

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Lecture 3: Contextualism and Definite Descriptions

Overview

Last week, we saw that there are a range of pragmatic processes that seem to play an extensive role in determining what a speaker says. We distinguished between linguistically controlled (or bottom-up) processes, which are triggered by the encoded meanings of the expressions uttered, and linguistically free (or top-down) processes, which are not. This week, using this distinction, we'll be able to distinguish between a range of different theoretical positions that theorists have taken up, both in a classic debate between *ideal* and *ordinary* language philosophers and in a more recent debate about the semantics and pragmatics of *definite descriptions*, such as 'the man in a grey coat'.

1. Grice and the Ordinary Language Debates

We saw that what is said with a sentence often seems to vary across contexts:

- (1) This leaf is green
 - a) green on the outside? [botanist case]
 - b) uniformly green on the outside? [pointillist case]
 - c) uniformly and opaquely green on the outside? [thin coat case]
- (2) 'and':
 - a) '∧'? ('pigs grunt and cows moo')
 - b) '∧ then'? ('John took off his trousers and got into bed')
 - c) '∧ as a consequence'? ('Rowan was found guilty and sentenced to life')

Ordinary language theorists, like Austin and Strawson, influenced by the later views of Wittgenstein, took these kinds of cases to illustrate a deep difference between natural

and formal languages, contrary to the views of **ideal language** theorists. The sort of variation that we find isn't due to any obviously indexical elements in the sentence (contrast the above examples with the way that what is said with 'I am hungry' varies with the speaker). And according to ordinary language theorists, this leaves the ideal language theorist with the implausible view that the variation is due to an ambiguity:

Ambiguity Analysis

The apparent variation in what is said with the sentence is genuine. Differences in what is said correspond to different disambiguations (e.g. of 'and').

Grice's theory of conversation offered the ideal language theorist a way to resist this implausible consequence. Instead, she could maintain that, despite appearances, the variation is not in what a speaker says, but rather in what the speaker *implicates*.

Implicature Analysis

Apparent variation in what is said with the sentence is merely apparent. The differences are in fact differences in what the speaker implicates.

Given the choice between an ambiguity analysis and an implicature analysis, moreover, Grice suggests that what he calls **Modified Occam's Razor** (MOR) — 'Senses should not be multiplied beyond necessity' (Grice 1989, p. 47) — tells in favour of the latter.

MOR seems plausible: just as a matter of psychological plausibility, we should prefer an account of examples like (2) that doesn't assume that we store all the different senses of 'and' in memory. And something like the implicature analysis is independently motivated by examples such as utterances of 'Coffee would keep me awake'. For all that, an implicature analysis of examples like (1) and (2) comes at a cost. For the claim that the differences are not genuine differences in what is said may seem implausible.

Consider the results of the following **embedding tests**:

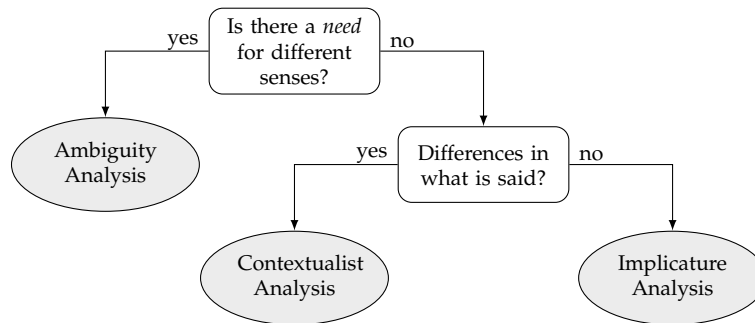
- 'If John took off his trousers and got into bed then he did what normal people do'
The temporal reading of 'and' is preserved under embedding.
- 'If coffee would keep me awake then I should have some if I want to stay awake'
Refusal/acceptance of coffee is *not* preserved under embedding.

From what we saw last week, however, we can see that there is a third option. Consider the different things that can seemingly be said with the word 'and'. The ambiguity analysis plausibly claims (i) that the differences are differences in what is said but implausibly claims (ii) that the differences are linguistically *controlled* (by different encoded meanings). The implicature analysis avoids (ii), but at a cost of giving up (i). But once we allow that not all differences in what can be said with a word are the result of linguistically controlled — that some differences in what can be said are due to *free* pragmatic processes like modulation — we can give up (ii) without also giving up (i).

Contextualist Analysis

The apparent variation in what is said with the sentence is genuine. The differences are the result of linguistically free pragmatic processes.

A decision tree for deciding between the three options:



2. A Case Study: Definite Descriptions

Are definite descriptions ('the computer') referring or quantifier expressions? On the face it, they may seem to be referring expressions, like the demonstrative 'that':

- (3) **That** is running Windows [pointing to a computer]
- (4) **The computer** is running Windows

In these cases, it seems the demonstrative and definite description are being used to refer to a particular object, and what is said is true IFF that object is running Windows.

Bertrand Russell ([Russell 1905](#)) famously argued that DDs were a species of quantifier expression. On his view, sentences of the form *the F is G* are analysed as conjunctions of three claims: (i) *there is at least one F*, (ii) *there is at most one F*, and (iii) *every F is G*.

See the Appendix for some motivations for Russellian analysis.

Attributive and Referential Uses

Keith Donnellan ([Donnellan 1966](#)) pointed out that while there are cases where definite descriptions seem to be used **attributively**, i.e. as quantifier expressions, there are also cases in which they seem to be used **referentially**, to refer to particular individuals.

Case 1

Smith has been murdered. The speaker does not know who the murderer was, but judges from the brutality of the crime that whoever did it must be

insane. She utters the sentence: 'Smith's murderer is insane'.

Case 2

Jones is on trial for Smith's murder. The speaker is observing his odd behaviour in the dock, and his rambling responses to questions, and concludes that he must be insane. She utters the sentence: 'Smith's murderer is insane'.

In the first case, the speaker intends to say that the person who murdered Smith, whoever that person may be, is insane. The truth conditions of this **attributive use** seem to be captured by the Russellian analysis. In the second case, however, the speaker has a particular person in mind, namely Jones, and intends to say that *he* is insane. The truth conditions of this **referential use** don't seem to be captured by the Russellian analysis. Rather, they are captured by an analysis which treats DDs like names or demonstratives, on which what is said is true IFF Jones is insane. (To press this thought: suppose that Jones is actually innocent, and the real murderer, call him White, is still at large. Still, the speaker is trying to say something that is true IFF Jones, not White, is insane.)

Three Analyses

How should we account for the different uses of definite descriptions?

A) The Ambiguity Analysis

One view is that sentences of the form 'the F is G' have two encoded meanings:

- (Attributive)
There is at least one F, and there is at most one F, and whatever is F is also G.
- (Referential)
If 'the F' is used to refer to x in a context c then: 'the F' refers to x in c .

We saw that MOR militates against an ambiguity analysis *if* we can do without the multiple meanings. (Can we? See the alternative analyses below.) But we might wonder whether MOR is as plausible as it first appeared. If both uses of DDs are widespread (as they surely are), wouldn't they become conventionalised and thereby encoded?

For defence of the ambiguity analysis and some further references, see ([Amaral 2008](#)). For criticism of MOR and some further references, see ([Phillips 2012](#)).

B) The Implicature Analysis

Suppose that the Russellian analysis is correct, so that what is said with a sentence of the form 'the F is G' is always the attributive interpretation: there is at least one F, there

is at most one F, and every F is G. Still, we might be able to derive a referential interpretation as an implicature. (For some discussion of how, exactly, see [Neale 1990](#), §3.5.)

If MOR is sound, this analysis is to be preferred to the ambiguity analysis. (Though we should ask whether we are right to privilege the attributive reading in pursuing this analysis. Could we equally well assumed that what is said is always the referential interpretation, and then derive attributive interpretations as implicatures? If so, which reading corresponds to the encoded meaning? How could we decide the issue?) Still, we might ask whether there really are two levels of interpretation in the referential use. (Or in the attributive use, should we decide that *that's* the derivative reading.) Also, is it plausible to maintain that the referential use arises only at the level of implicature, rather than what's said? (Recall the embedding test we applied to the case of 'and'.)

C) The Contextualist Analysis

There's some reason to think that it's *not* plausible to maintain that the referential use arises only at the level of implicature. Consider one of Donnellan's examples:

(5) The man in the corner drinking a martini is a famous philosopher

Suppose that there is no man in the corner drinking a martini, and that the man that the speaker intends to pick out is drinking water out of a martini glass. Suppose further that he *is* a famous philosopher. Is what the speaker says true or false? What truth value should it have on (a) the attributive reading, (b) the referential reading?

If we want to allow that the referential interpretation arises at the level of what is said, but resist an ambiguity analysis, we can go contextualist, say that the definite description is univocal (unambiguous), and that attributive and/or referential readings are the result of free pragmatic processes of some sort.

The pressing question for this view concerns the encoded meaning of the description. What is it? One option is to say (roughly) that the attributive reading is encoded, and the referential reading arises as a result of some process of modulation. An alternative is to say that neither reading is encoded, and that the encoded meaning is rather *procedural*. Roughly, the idea here is that the encoded meaning of the DD is an instruction to access a concept of a certain sort, and that the instruction in question is neutral as to whether the concept that gets retrieved is descriptive, picking out an individual indirectly as whatever uniquely satisfies a certain (encoded) description, or is rather *de re*, picking out an individual directly; the reading will be attributive where the concept is descriptive, referential where it is *de re*.

For detailed contextualist treatments of definite descriptions, see ([Recanati 1993](#), Ch. 15) and ([Powell 2001](#)).

3. Summary

- The debate between ordinary language and ideal language theorists.
- Grice's theory of conversation offered ideal language theorists a further option.
- Contextualism offers yet another option.
- Russell's theory of definite descriptions.
- Donnellan's attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions.
- Three possible analyses: ambiguity, implicature, and contextualist.

Back-Up Reading and Questions

Reading

Read ([Powell 2001](#)).

Questions

1. How could you decide whether the differences mentioned in (1) and (2), or in Donnellan's examples involving 'Smith's murderer is insane', are *truth-conditional* differences, i.e. at the level of what is said? Can you think of tests for deciding?
2. a) Give a paraphrase of the salient interpretations of the following sentences. Is the definite description being used attributively, referentially, or in some other way?
 - i. The first baby born in the 22nd century will be female.
 - ii. The man in the pink suit is our new editor.
 - iii. The idiot in the pink suit is our new editor.
 - iv. The richest person in the world is now a woman.
 - v. The whale is a mammal.
 - vi. The guy I met yesterday was very funny.b) Are these interpretations evidence for or against any of the analyses we've looked at (ambiguity, implicature, modulation)?
3. Many of the different interpretations of definite descriptions that we have looked at also occur in other languages. The equivalent of 'The F' in French, German, and many other languages, for example, has the same possibilities of interpretation as 'The F' does. Is this evidence for or against an ambiguity analysis?

References

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A. Motivating the Russellian Analysis

Part of the appeal of Russell's analysis is that it seems to solve various puzzles.

Empty Descriptions

Consider:

- (6) **He** is bald [pointing to empty space]
- (7) **The King of France** is bald

Simplifying slightly, Russell thought that such a use of (6) would fail to express a proposition. He thought that uses of (7), on the other hand, express a proposition, albeit one that is false¹, as his analysis predicts. It is true IFF (i) **there is at least one King of France**, (ii) there is at most one King of France, and (iii) every King of France is bald.

Scope Distinctions

Another puzzle concerns the way that DDs interact with negation. Consider:

- (8) a) **Pierre** is not bald
b) It is not the case that **Pierre** is bald

¹Because there is no King of France!

- (9) a) **Some lecturer** is not Scottish
 b) It is not the case that **some lecturer** is Scottish
- (10) a) **The King of France** is not bald
 b) It is not the case that **the King of France** is bald

In each case, negation takes **narrow scope** with respect to the expression in bold in the (a) sentence and **wide scope** in the (b) sentence. But as the examples in (8) illustrate, if the expression in bold is a name, a difference in scope doesn't make for any difference in the truth conditions of what is said: (8a) and (8b) are both true IFF Pierre is not bald.

The examples in (9) illustrate that a difference in scope *does* make a truth conditional difference when the expression in bold is a quantifier phrase, however. (9a) is true IFF some lecturer is not Scottish, whereas (9b) is true IFF *every* lecturer is not Scottish.

Are DDs more like names in this respect, or quantifier expressions? Arguably, the examples in (9) show that they are more like the latter. Arguably, (10a) is false (or at least ambiguous and on one reading false). But (10b) seems to be true. (Imagine someone were to say to you 'The King of France is bald!'. You'd probably use (10b) to disagree.)

And these are the truth values that the Russellian analysis predicts. On the one hand, (10a) comes out as true IFF each of the following claims are true: (i) there is at least one King of France, (ii) there is at most one King of France, and (iii) every King of France is not bald. And since claim (i) is false, the whole sentence comes out as being false.

On the other hand, (10b) comes out as true IFF at least one of the following claims are *false*: (i) there is at least one King of France, (ii) there is at most one King of France, and (iii') every King of France is bald. Since (i) is false, the whole thing comes out as true.

Negative Existentials

Consider:

- (11) **The King of France** does not exist

According to Russell, (11) is true. How is this to be explained? The worry is that if we suppose that the DD is a referring expression, the sentence is true only if there exists an individual which doesn't exist. But this is a contradiction, so it can't be true!

On Russell's analysis, we avoid the problem by treating the sentence as being true IFF at least one of the following claims is false: (i) there is at least one King of France and (ii) there is at most one King of France. This can be the case without contradiction.