Lecture 8: From definite descriptions to names

Final summary of definite descriptions

Russell’s view:
1. The prime minister of Great Britain is male
2. a is M
3. He is male
4. There is one and only one prime minister of Great Britain and he is male

Pragmatic approaches to Donnellan’s referential use of definite descriptions:
5. The man standing in the corner wearing an orange tie is Oscar’s brother
6. There is one and only one man standing in the corner wearing an orange tie and he is Oscar’s brother
7. Floyd is Oscar’s brother

8. Implicature account (Grice, Kripke, Neale):
   What is said (= truth-conditional content of the utterance): as in (6) above
   What is implicated: as in (7) above

9. Contextualist account (Recanati, Powell):
   i.e. Pragmatics affects (‘intrudes on’) the truth-conditional content of the utterance:
   What is said (t-c content): Floyd is Oscar’s brother

Important development:
Pragmatics (speaker intentions, contextual considerations, maxim-guided inference)
affects meaning at the explicit level (what is said, t-c content) so there is a split
between (encoded) expression-type meaning and truth-conditional content.

Three levels of meaning:
   a. Expression-type meaning (context-free meaning of “The F”)
   b. Proposition expressed (= what is said = truth-conditional content)
      [There is no “literal” proposition expressed]
   c. Conversational implicature
Proper names

a. What do they mean?
b. Are they referring expressions or denoting expressions?

The view of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873):

“A proper name is but an unmeaning mark.” J.S. Mill

Mill’s wider account of meaning: the denotation / connotation distinction.

Consider the definite description “The captain of the England football team in 2005”

Denotation: David Beckham [the man, not the name]
Connotation: the property of being captain of the England football team in 2005

The connotation of an expression is its meaning.
The denotation of an expression is not part of its meaning.
[Compare Frege’s two-tiered theory: sense and reference]

Consider the name “David Beckham”

Denotation: David Beckham
Connotation: ???

All expressions have both denotation and connotation, except for proper names which have only denotation. So, strictly speaking, proper names have no meaning.

Problems with Mill’s view:

10. a. Reginald Dwight is Elton John.
    b. Elton John is Elton John.

11. a. Joe believes that Elton John is a famous musician.
    b. Joe believes that Reginald Dwight is a famous musician.

12. Vulcan must have a shorter year than Venus
    Proposition expressed: ___ must have a shorter year than Venus

13. Vulcan doesn’t exist
    Truth value: ??

NB: These are exactly the same problems as we saw for a purely referential theory of definite descriptions.
Strategy: Solve the problem for names by adopting the same solution as adopted for descriptions

Frege’s descriptivist account of names:
Proper names have ‘sense’ as well as reference [their sense determines their reference]
But what is the sense of a proper name?
Frege: The sense of a name is (roughly) the way that someone using the name is thinking of the individual who is the bearer of the name.

14. Tony Blair is the leader of the Labour Party
15. The Prime Minister of Great Britain is the leader of the Labour Party

**Russell’s descriptivist account of names:**
Russell’s two classes of singular expressions: genuine referring expressions and denoting expressions. Which class do names fall into?

Knowledge by acquaintance vs. knowledge by description
To grasp the meaning of a genuine referring expression you have to be in an epistemic relation of acquaintance with the thing it refers to.
Russell’s claim: We can never be in that kind of relation with other individuals.

So proper names are in fact denoting expressions rather than referring expressions. Proper names are definite descriptions in disguise.

16. David Beckham lives in Madrid

   (16) is semantically equivalent to:

17. The England footballer who’s married to Victoria Adams lives in Madrid
18. There is one and only one England footballer who’s married to Victoria Adams and he lives in Madrid.
19. “David Beckham lives in Madrid” is true if and only if
   (a) there’s at least one England footballer who’s married to VA,
   (b) there’s at most one England footballer who’s married to VA, and
   (c) whoever is an England footballer married to VA lives in Madrid.

**Russellian (and Fregean) descriptivism solves the problems with Mill:**

20. Woody Allan is Woody Allen
21. Allen Konigsberg is Woody Allen

22. There is one and only one director of Annie Hall and there is one and only one director of Annie Hall and they are the same.
23. There is one and only one tallest kid in 3B and there is one and only one director of Annie Hall and they are the same.

**Homework reading:**