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Philosophy, Mathematics, Linguistics: Aspects of Interactions

Tutorial Graham Priest / Friederike Moltmann:
Existence, Nonexistence, and Numbers

Handout 3:

Intentional Objects: A (Sketch of a) Novel Proposal

1. The question to be pursued:

where exactly do they 'show up' in the semantics of natural language and what does this indicate concerning the nature of intentional objects?

1. objects of quantification:

In Meinongian statements:

(1) There are things that do not exist – golden mountains, square circles, …

As indefinite complements of intentional verbs, verbs of reference:

(2) a. John mentioned some woman that does not exist.

   b. Mary had imagined a big palace that never had come into existence.

   c. Mary made reference to some poet that does not exist.

   d. The book is about a detective that does not exist.

In *there*-sentences with relative clause with intenstional verb of reference:

(3) a. There are some women John mentioned that do not exist.

   b. There is a poet John made reference to that does not exist.

   c. There is a detective the book is about that does not exist.

2. negative existentials

(4) a. The things the book is about exist / do not exist.

   b. The two people the book is about exist / do not exist.

c. What the book is about exists / does not exist.

(5) The people John mentioned do exist / do not exist.

2. The dependence on intentional objects of referential acts

<u>Linguistic observations</u>

restricted to verbs of reference

not available with extensional verbs or standard intensional verbs

(6) a.* I met a woman that does not exist.

    b. * I need an assistant that does not exist

    c. * I am looking for a new friend that does not exist.

(7) a.* There is an assistant that John needs.

    b. * There is a new friend that John is looking for.

3. fictional characters and intentional objects

Fictional characters:

Are (in any case) the referents of explicit terms referring to them

the fictional character Anna Karenina

Existence:

Intuition tells us that fictional characters exist:

(8) The fictional character Anna Karenina exists.

(9) a. Anna Karenina was created by Tolstoy.

    b. Anna Karenina serves as a model for an unhappily married, intelligent woman.

(10) a. ?? Tolstoy created Anna Karenina, who does not exist.

    b. ?? Anna Karenina was created by Tolstoy, but does not exist.

But:

(11) a. Anna Karenina does not exist.

    b. The golden mountain does not exist.

Here obviously not reference to a ictional charatcetr, but to an intentional object

Internal and external predication

Internal predication:

predication of properties as attributed in the story ('nuclear properties')

External predication:

predication of properties from the outside, to what is created by creating the story ('extra-nuclear properties')

being created, existence, having literary influence: (generally) externally predicated

The idea:

Intentional objects have only properties as attributed in the quasi-referential act (attempted or pretended reference), which means intensional objects have only internally predicated properties

How is this possible?

Objects introduced by 'abstraction' in a roughly Fregean sense, or objects introduced by 'something-from-nothing transformations' (Schiffer)

Intentional objects are 'light' objects:

There is nothing more to them than what properties they 'hold' on the basis of property-attributions involved in referential acts from which the objects are abstracted.

Intentional objects will be essentially incomplete and could have no such properties as (actual) existence or createdness, since these can be predicated only externally

Intentional objects can be abstraction from a single quasi-referential act or some set of coordinated quasi-referential acts (story, historical chain etc).

Two quasi-referential acts are coordinated in case in any world in which they are successful they are satisfied by the same object.

The associated formal semantics:

Nominal scan make implicit reference to referential acts, formally lets say by coindexing with a referential act (or a set of coordinated referential acts)

(12) $[N'_i] = \lambda x[x = abst(ref(e_i, [N']))$

Coindexing of the nominal with an intentional verb of reference gives the interpretation of a nominal dependent on the event argument described by the verb:

(13) a. John mentioned$_1$ [a woman]$_1$.

b. $\exists$e $\exists$o(mention(e, John, o) & λx[x = abstr(ref(e, [*woman*]))](o))

Subjects of negative existential

Evidence for implicit reference to referential act:

Subject must have been used in a quasi-refeerntial act – not any empty term will do:

(14) a. ??? Barkab does not exist.

b. My brother does not exist.

c. ? The only object in the empty bowl does not exist.

Coordination with term denoting past object possible:

(15) a. Kant and the present king of France do not exist.

b. Neither Kant nor the present king of France exists.

(16) Everyone we talked about except Kant and Anna Karenina exist.

Treated like denoting term:

(17) a. Every one we talked about except Anna Karenina exists.

b. Only the present king of France does not exist.