*Philosophy of Language: Natural Language Ontology*

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**Handout 9**

**The Chomskyan Challenges to Referentialist Semantics 1**

**1. The standard semantic view about truth and reference**

Sentences have truth conditions  
Semantics aims (among other things) at giving truth conditions for sentences.

Objects of reference play an important in truth conditions of sentences

Referential NPs

The standard semantic view in linguistics and philosophy (Frege):

Referential NPs serve to stand for objects

Objects are arguments of predicates.

Semantic compositions involves the application of predicates to objects, to give truth values.

Quantificational NPs

Standard (nonspecial) quantificational NPs: range over objects that are potential arguments of predicates.

Anaphora

Stand for objects, as variables or as referential NPs

The Chomskyan view about semantics

[1] ‘Referential NPs’ do not refer to entities in the world.

‘Referential NPs’ do not stand for entities at all, not even merely conceived ones.

Semantics cannot be referentialist semantics: truth and reference play no role in semantics

[2] Semantics can only involve another level of representation, a level of cognitive representation, and thus another level of syntax.

Semantics must be internalist, not externalist.

Semantic composition can only be a form of concept composition

Presuppositions of Chomsky’s

1. *Reference* is a relation between expressions and entities in a mind-independent physical world.

2. *Entities* are mind-independent beings that occupy a particular spatio-temporal location and are subject to standard conditions on property-attribution.

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**2. Reference as a relation between expressions and entities in a mind-independentworld?**

‘Reference’ in natural language includes an intensional relation (Moltmann 2018) and d’Ambrosio 2019):

(3) a. John referred to a ghost.

b. John referred to the woman described in the novel.

My conclusion

Reference does not require actual entities, but may apply to intenttional objects.

D’Ambrosio’s conclusion

Reference relation conveyed by *refer* is compatible with externalist and internalist semantics.

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**3. Some Chomskyan examples**

**3.1. Standard examples of artifacts**

Ships:

can be rebuild with different material (ship of Theseus), not identical to particular physical entities.

Houses:

likewise; can be rebuild at different locations.

**3.2. Doors, windows**

What we refer to as a ‘door’ could be painted, replaced, and walked through, properties that could not be attributed jointly to material objects as standardly understood.

**3.3. Home vs. house**

Chomsky:

What we refer to as a ‘home’ may have peculiar combinations of properties:

one can own or sell a home, but not paint a home, in contrast to a house.

But how can houses and homes be distinct objects in an external world?

**3.4. Water vs. H20**

Chomsky: ‘Water is not H2O’

- What we refer to as ‘water’ can be dirty, polluted, but not so H20

- Sprite has the same chemical composition as tap water, but unlike tap water, sprite is not water.

Conclusion:

‘Water’ is not individuated as a physical substance in an external mind-independent, but depends on its function within our daily life.

**3.5. More general conclusion**

Apparent objects of reference include:

- Various spatio-temporally coincident and materially coincident are treated as distinct entities

- ‘Entities’ that bear contradictory properties and do not fulfill standard conditions on individuation, and hence could be objects as standardly understood

- Entities individuated by their function and are not mind-independent

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**4. Fine’s (1999, 2020) theory embodiment**

**4.1. Rigid and variable embodiments**

Rigid embodiments

Consist of entities and their structural relations

Variable embodiments

Involve a function from locations to rigid embodiments

Examples of rigid embodiments

- ‘ The water in the container right now’

- Words, as composed of phonemes

- The married couple of John and Mary

Examples of variable embodiments

- ‘The water in the container’

- The president of the US

- Artifacts: ships, houses, chairs, scultures etc

- Organisms: bodies, trees

- A nuclear family: John, Mary and their children

The idea of the theory of embodiments (Fine 1999)

Associate with an object o a form F, a function from times to realizations:

Rigid embodiments: F is a constant function

Variable embodiments: F is a not constant function

E.g. the president of the US p: Fp(t) the president of the IS at t

**4.2. Fine (2020): Social Groups**

**4.2.1. Location**

Example: All Souls College

The puzzle:

All Souls College is located where the building is located

All Souls college consists of fellows, who make take vacations in various places.

But their locations are not the location of the college.

The solution:

All Souls college consists of the building on Broad Street and its fellows.

But the building will be a spatial part, and the fellows the temporal parts.

All Souls College manifested at any given time by a rigid embodiment composed of the fellows and the building:

The rigid embodiment will be where the building is and not necessarily where the fellows are.

And so for the corresponding variable embodiment:

All Souls College *inherits* its location from its spatial parts (at a time), but not its temporal parts.

**3.2.2. Mixed character**

Example: France as a geographical area and as a social entity

Apparent contradictory properties:

(1) a. France is hexagonal.

b. France is a member of the UN.

*France* is ambiguous?

*France* does not refer ? (Chomsky)

Linguistic arguments for there being a single referent – a variable embodiment

(2) a. The entity which the person visited is the very same entity which is a member of the

United Nations

b. Joe visited a country that recently became a charter member of the UN.

‘France’ as a variable embodiment

For time t at which France exists:

Ff(t) the geographical region at t (spatial parts) + political entity at t (temporal parts)

**3.2.3. Structure**

Example: a committee

* Can have different members at different times
* Can be structured differently into sub-committees at different times

A committee c as a variable embodiment

For times t at which c exists:

Fc(t) = the rigid embodiment of c with structure S

The same structure S for all times t at which c exists: S is essential to c

Not the same S for all times t at which c exists: S is not essential to c.

A structure is essential to rigid embodiment manifesting a variable embodiment.

If having a structure S is a constraint on all rigid embodiments, then S is essential to the variable embodiment.

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