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James Paul Gee

Hampshire College/Amherst

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Gee: A Epistemically-Based Theory of Referential Distinctions

A Epistemically-Based Theory of Referential Distinctions

James Paul Gee
Hampshire College/Amherst

It is now a commonplace that a sentence like (1) can be understood in two ways.¹ On one understanding (1) does not necessarily entail its substitution instances or its existential generalization with respect to "the man who murdered Smith". On the other understanding (1) does necessarily have these entailments.

1. John believes the man who murdered Smith is insane.

There are also common informal paraphrase criteria for these two understandings:²

- 2a. John believes the man who murdered Smith, whoever he may be, is insane.
- b. John believes (of) the man who in fact is the man who murdered Smith (that he) is insane.

It is hard to know exactly what to call these two understandings. There is terminological chaos in the literature in this area as far as I can see and words like "de dicto-de re" and "attributive-referential" are used to a variety of purposes and confusions. I want to start anew in this area and to begin more generally than is now common, so let me simply borrow terms in a non-systematic fashion. Let me call the type of understanding paraphrased in (2a) the de dicto (DD) understanding, the type of understanding in (2b) the de re (DR) understanding. I know others have used these terms differently than I will proceed to use them.

Many people have pointed out that the informal paraphrase criteria above appear to be met by sentences like (3) which have no overt intentional operator (Donnellan (1966), Partee (1970), Greenberg (1976), Kaplan (n.d.)):³

3. The man who murdered Smith is insane.
- 4a. The man who murdered Smith, whoever he is, is insane.
- b. The man who in fact is the man who murdered Smith is insane.

This claim is correct, I believe. There are cases where only one such understanding is possible or, at least, natural. For example, (5) has only a natural DD understanding, (6) only a natural DR understanding:

5. The Governor of California, unless Jerry Brown is the Governor still, is a fool.

6. The man who murdered Smith is standing over there.

Of course, formal and informal criteria diverge here. Substitutivity and Existential Generalization do not fail on any understanding of (3), though interesting things happen if you substitute "Jerry Brown" for the underlined NP in (5).

It has also not gone unnoticed that indefinite NPs, as well as definites, give rise to sorts of understandings that appear to relate to our informal paraphrase criteria for DD/DR understandings (Fillmore (1961), Fodor (1970), Ioup (1977)):

7. A Frenchman cooked this meal.
- 8a. DD: A Frenchman, whoever he is, cooked this meal.
- b. DR: A person who is in fact a Frenchman cooked this meal.

And, of course, to round things out there's the standard sort of case in (9):

9. John thinks a Frenchman cooked this meal.

Now the point here, I would think, is this: if we approach this phenomena as we would approach any linguistic phenomena our first attempt should be to find out if there is a significant generalization to be captured here and if we can uncover the unity (if there is any) of the phenomena at hand. Perhaps there is only a spurious generalization here to be had, but we cannot know this without first attempting to account for these phenomena in a general way. True success would be an account that captured the unity and where the specific differences fell out on the basis of independent and equally general principles. Before concerning myself then with the general account let me list some of the specific differences:

- 10a. Substitutivity and Existential Generalization can fail in intentional contexts, but not (at least in the same way) outside them.
- b. The different ways of understanding (1) and (9) affect the truth conditions for those sentences, but they do not affect the truth conditions of (3) or (7).
- c. There are various differences between the definite cases and the indefinite cases.

It has not been so often noticed that with the DD category we get two separate sorts of understandings. For instance, a sentence like (11) even when understood DD can still be understood in two ways:

11. The man who murdered Smith is insane.

(11) can mean something like (12a):

12a. The man who murdered Smith is in virtue of being the man who murdered Smith insane.

When understood this way (11) is liable to be connected with some general principle like "Anyone who murders someone is insane" or "Anyone who would murder Smith (or a person like Smith) is insane". The principle is related to the content of the descriptive phrase in (11) though not completely determined by it, but rather open to pragmatic determination. Note though that given the principle (whatever it is) and the fact that someone did murder Smith, (11) logically follows.

But (11) may just mean something like (12b):

12b. The man who murdered Smith whoever he may happen to be (I don't necessarily know who or, perhaps, care) is insane.

I may not in uttering (11) here hold any such general principle as was involved above, but though I do not know or care who exactly it is who murdered Smith (it's not relevant to my claim) I know that whoever did it, he's insane. Perhaps there were indications at the murder site that it was the work of a madman.

And, of course, (11) can be understood DR--"The man who in fact is the man who murdered Smith (namely x) is insane".

The three different possibilities here can be clearly seen if we consider an utterance of (11) in connection with possible responses to a challenge to (11) treated as a claim (How do you know he's insane?).⁴ Three basic (sorts of) responses are open and each one takes (11) in one of its basic possible understandings:

13a. How do you know? He must be insane, anyone who commits murder is insane.

b. How do you know? We know he must be insane (whoever he is) from such and such evidence.

- c. How do you know? Bill Jones did it and he's insane (as we all know, or as you can see or could find out).

I will call the first sort of understanding above, the one based on some sort of general principle, "the DDV case" (de dicto in virtue); the second case I will call "the DDS case" (simple whoever or whatever de dicto case); finally, I will call the third understanding "the DR case" (de re, as before).

The responses in (13) are principled and, in a sense, exhaustive (as types, not tokens of course). Certain sentences are most naturally understood one way or the other. For example, "The man who murdered Smith is a murderer" is a limiting case of the DDV understanding. Or take (14) below (ex. from Kripke (1976)):

14. Mary's favorite pet is an Airedale.

(14) is most naturally understood, if taken DD, as DDS, there being no likely general principle relating "being an Airedale" and "being Mary's favorite pet". Likewise for "The person who won the last Nobel Peace Prize is insane". If DD, it is not likely to be understood DDV. Of course we cannot rule out the possibility that somebody does hold such general principles. But notice that if one utters (14) without having some general principle relating "being Mary's favorite pet" and "being an Airedale", and without knowing which pet is in fact Mary's favorite pet, then there must be something the speaker knows that relates "being Mary's favorite pet" and "being an Airedale", or else he would not put forth (14) as a truth claim. And what he is liable to know, in this case, is some evidence (in a broad sense) that whatever pet may in fact be Mary's favorite pet, it is an Airedale (perhaps someone told him or he knows Mary has always had an Airedale in the past as her favorite, or he knows Mary's predilections in pets, and so on almost endlessly).

The three responses in (13) and the three ways of understanding (11) involve three sorts of knowledge at work:

- 15a. Knowledge of Concepts and Their Relations
 b. Knowledge of Evidential Relations
 c. Knowledge of Individuals and Their Properties and Relations

or, for short: Concepts, Evidence, and Individuals.

When we consider the level of claims and challenges to claims, indefinites work the same as definites:

- 16a. A Frenchman cooked this meal. How do you know?
Anyone who cooks this way must be French. (Concepts)
- b. ... How do you know? The indications are that whoever cooked this meal, he's French (e.g. it says so on the menu). (Evidence)
- c. ... How do you know? Pierre did it and Pierre is a Frenchman. (Individuals)

At the level of talk of claims and challenges to claims the extension to cases inside the scope of overt intentional operators is not difficult.⁶ Here also there is a relationship to how claims are backed up, but in this case we are (often) concerned with how the subject would back up his belief (let us say) if challenged with "Why do you believe that?"

17. John believes the man who murdered Smith is insane.
- 18a. Why does John believe that? Because John believes anyone who would murder someone must be insane. (Concepts)
- b. Why does John believe that? Because John believes the indications are that whoever did it he's insane. (Evidence)
- c. Why does John believe that? Because John believes Jones did it and believes (knows) he's insane. (Individuals)

I am not claiming that any of (18a-c) need be part of the content of John's belief. I am not (now) doing epistemology. I am claiming that knowing the appropriateness of this challenge and these sorts of responses are part of what we know about our language (of course in use).

In considering (17) we are taking the embedded sentence as within the scope of believe. We could consider (17) as something like (19) also:

19. The man who murdered Smith (is such that) John believes him to be insane.

Now (19) is just like (11) I would claim. The descriptive NP can be understood DDS, DDV, or DR, and this relates to the three sorts of responses available to a challenge of "How do you know?". But the DDV understanding is going to be unlikely as it would require a general principle relating "being the man who murdered Smith" and "being believed by John to be insane". A DDS or DR understanding is plausible (e.g. there is evidence that whoever murdered Smith John will (does) believe him insane (DDS); or, the man who in fact murdered Smith is Bill Jones and John, we know, thinks Jones is insane (DR)).

I do not want to claim here that there is any necessity of ever representing (17) as (19). All I would claim is that we know what (17) amounts to under the challenge "Why does he believe that?" and what it amounts to under the challenge "How do you know that?".

The way I have treated (17) and (19) merits close inspection, I believe. For example, one might note that all of the "readings" claimed for such sentences (some more commonly claimed than others) can be captured.

I have distinguished the three understandings I am interested in on the basis of what underlies the claims that sentences they are associated with can be used to make. But what is all this talk of claims and challenges to claims?

We could put it this way: Part (at least) of what it is to know the meaning of a sentence is to know what its use is, to know what can be done with it, to know what role(s) it can play. A sentence like (11) can be used to make a claim. If one did not know how it could be used to make a claim and what claim it could be used to make, he could not be said to know the meaning of (11). Further, part of what it means to know what it is to make a claim is to know what challenges are available to claims and what responses are available to these challenges. This amounts to saying that we know what it amounts to to have the right to claim p. The process of having rights to claim, challenges to claims, and responses to claims is principled, as I will show shortly.

The sorts of understandings I have delineated arise (I would claim) as part and parcel of our knowledge of claims and challenges to claims. What, then, are the conceptual foundations of our account?

Epistemologists have been interested for some time in how an assertion-challenge-assertion series can be put to an end (the question is often put in the guise of the search for the foundations of knowledge). Some have sought for incorrigible knowledge claims to

end such series. But a more fruitful approach has been in the area of conceptual truths.⁷ An assertion like (20) can give rise to a challenge like (21):

20. The library burned down last night.

21. How do you know?

If the asserter now asserts something like (22) he has asserted something which, in the normal case, it is inappropriate to challenge:

22. I saw it (burn down).

Any challenge to (22) must take a different form--something like "But we all know you regularly hallucinate fires". The important point is that such a challenge is not always available and when it isn't, (22) is inappropriate to challenge--we cannot go on and ask again "How do you know?". (22) is inappropriate to challenge in the normal case because it is based on or related to a conceptual truth, something like (23):

23. That someone saw (heard, remembered) something is always a reason (or grounds)--though not always a conclusive reason (grounds)--to claim that it happened.

If there are no countermending reasons overriding the reason always available by (23) in the case at hand, then we cannot go on to challenge (22)--to do so would be to call into question the conceptual truth in (23) (which is, at least, another game with very different rules). So this approach ends the assertion-challenge-assertion series with an assertion, an assertion it is inappropriate to challenge.

If we look somewhat deeper into the matter, we can see that the assertion-challenge-assertion series can end typically in three ways. If I have claimed "S is P" I can back this up in the face of a challenge of "How do you know?" by:⁸

- A. Producing S and showing you it is P (or by assuring you I could do so).
- B. Showing you there is evidence that whatever (whoever) S is, though I can't produce it (in reality or through linguistic conventions), it is in all probability P.

- C. Showing you that though I can't produce S or offer you any concrete empirical evidence relevant to the case in hand that S is P, it is irrelevant as S must be P, given that whatever is S has the property of being S and anything that has the property of being S, has the property P.

The first case involves a rational ending to the assertion-challenge-assertion series because such replies are backed up by conceptual truths such as (23). Elsewhere (Gee (1975)) I have argued that direct-object and naked infinitive constructions (e.g. "I saw John steal(ing) the car") with perception verbs play the role of producing an object and showing that it has a certain property or properties (and the related role of introducing individuals and their properties into discourse). The second case is a rational end because something such as the following is a conceptual truth:

24. That someone has evidence for p is always a reason (grounds)--though not always a conclusive reason (grounds)--to claim p.

Finally, the last case above is a rational ending because the principles of deduction are principles of our conceptual system.⁹ Thus, if there is a principle to the effect that "Anyone who could cook a meal like this one must be French", to hark back to an earlier example and to show the case with an indefinite, then we know that this gives us grounds to claim either (25) or (26):

25. A Frenchman cooked this meal.
26. The person who cooked this meal is French.

We get, then, a general schema like this:

- 27a. ASSERT: S is P
b. CHALLENGE: How do you know?
c. Three possible ways to reply to the challenge, each of which yields a different understanding of "S" (DDV, DDS, DR), based on:
i. Concepts (deductive relations)
ii. Evidence (evidential, probabilistic, inductive relations)

iii. Individuals and Their Properties
(acquaintance, individuation,
perception)

- d. Further challenge inappropriate if no special circumstances obtain given that the reply is backed up by the appropriate conceptual truths.

So I have given an account of the understandings I started this paper with in terms of what it is to understand claims and challenges to claims. I have at least sketched a way in which the unity underlying the various cases discussed previously can be approached. The account is, of course, pragmatic. One of the indications that the distinctions we are trying to get at are pragmatic can be seen if we consider cases where pronouns can give rise to the same distinctions.¹⁰ For example, say two policemen come upon a murder scene of utter carnage. One might say to the other (concerning whoever did it):

28. He's insane.

(28) is naturally understood DD here (either DDV or DDS), and, of course, it could (in another context perhaps) be understood DR. For a DDV understanding in a case like (28) the relationship of the general principle backing up the claim and the NP (the pronoun) in (28) is totally determined by the context. Note also that (28) with a DD reading can also occur in the context of an overt intentional verb, for example, say the policeman had said:

29. The chief'll believe he's insane.

I have given an account of our understanding of DR, DDS, DDV occurrences of NPs in terms of what underlies the claims that can be made by sentences they occur in. There is no problem of principle with extending the account to other sentence types that are not used to make claims. For example, a question like "Is the man who murdered Smith insane?" could be viewed as questioning the claim "The man who murdered Smith is insane" and this claim is capable of being understood in any of the three ways I have pointed to. This seems, in fact, to be correct. Notice that the above question can be answered in three basic ways corresponding to the three basic ways of answering challenges to the claim being questioned, e.g. "Yes, John did it and he's insane", or "Yes, there's evidence that whoever did it is insane", or "Yes, anyone who kills someone is insane". Notice that all of the above answers are answers to the question, since each determines the truth value of the sentence "The man who murdered Smith is insane". Our account says why this should be so, since it delineates the relationship between claims and grounds for claims.

Let me indicate shortly how the account I am giving may be seen in slightly more formal terms. Let us assume that we have a theory of grammar (see Chomsky (1975, 1976)) which yields us logical forms from surface structures via rules of semantic interpretation (Chomsky's SR-1 rules). I would propose that the sorts of understandings we have been dealing with are not represented in logical form,¹¹ rather they are handled in a theory of the interaction of sentence grammar and cognitive systems of knowledge and belief, a theory which takes logical forms and yields us representations of meaning in a broader sense (Chomsky's SR-2 rules).

Let us assume for simplicity that the sentences in (30a) and (31a) below have logical representations like (30b) and (31b).¹²

- 30a. The man who murdered Smith is insane.
- b. $\text{Ex} (x \text{ is the man who murdered Smith and } x \text{ is insane})$
- 31a. A Frenchman cooked this meal.
- b. $\text{Ex} (x \text{ is a Frenchman and } x \text{ cooked this meal})$

Assume now that our SR-2 system (pragmatics if you like) performs a sort of existential instantiation on (30b) and (31b) giving us (30c) and (31c):

- 30c. a is the man who murdered Smith and a is insane.
- 31c. a is a Frenchman and a cooked this meal.

Assume now that we have various sets of possible worlds representing various sorts of possibility, e.g. logical, ethical, natural (empirical), legal possibility, etc. Now a can function referentially (or be viewed as functioning) differently vis-a-vis the relevant possible worlds (cf. Hintikka (1969, 1975)). First, a could be a rigid designator picking out the same individual in fact picks out in the actual world in each relevant possible world (cf. Kripke (1972)). While a (to take example (30)) is (held to be) the man who murdered Smith and is insane at the actual world, he need not have these properties in other possible worlds. This would correspond to what I have called the DR understanding and corresponds to the fact that on this understanding of (30) the speaker, in answering a challenge to his claim, produces an individual (usually via a rigid designator or a perceptual claim) and displays its properties (also usually via linguistic means).

Second, a may pick out different individuals in different relevant possible worlds, say for example the set of empirically possible worlds, but in each such world whoever a picks out that individual murdered Smith and is insane (in that world). Here there is a non-arbitrary correlation between being the murderer of Smith and being insane since in the set of worlds meant to spell out the set of empirical possibilities these two properties are always correlated. This means that there must be some principle (say that it is an empirical impossibility for anyone to murder someone and be sane) of the realm of empirical possibility that ensures that in each world whoever murdered Smith is insane, or else it would be a possibility that these two properties could come uncorrelated and this possibility would have to be represented in the set of empirically possible worlds (thus there would be, counter our hypothesis, some world where a was the man who murdered Smith but not insane). This case corresponds to the understanding I earlier called DDV and corresponds to the fact that, on this understanding, the speaker, in answering a challenge to his claim, produces a general principle correlating properties (the principle corresponding to the set of worlds in which the correlation holds, the empirically, or biologically, or ethically, or legally possible worlds, etc.).

Third, and finally, a may pick out different individuals in different epistemic worlds (let us say) for the speaker or the hearer and yet in each of these worlds a is the man who murdered Smith and a is insane.¹³ Here too there must be something that ensures this correlation but here it will be a fact about the speaker's (or hearer's) knowledge (or belief) worlds, i.e. something he knows, some evidence he has. This case corresponds to the understanding I earlier called DDS.

Our system of SR-2 could then be viewed as a system that takes logical representations and says what various possible world systems would look like if a given sentence is understood in one way or another. Not all cases will have all conceivable understandings, these limitations being determined by extra-linguistic knowledge, for example our knowledge of what principles are plausible and what are not. SR-2 is saying, then, "here is what the sets of possibilities would look like if this sentence is (or could be) understood in such and such a way".

Take now cases inside intentional operators:

- 32a. John believes the man who murdered Smith is insane.
- b. John believes Ex! (x is the man who murdered Smith and x is insane).

- c. John believes a is the man who murdered Smith
and a is insane.

Here SR-2 will turn (32b) into (32c) and work exactly the same as above, save here the various possible worlds are defined relative to John's beliefs (e.g. John's beliefs about empirical possibility, about legal possibility, etc.). SR-2 will also say that another possibility here is that (32b) can correspond to (32d) below:

- d. a is the man who murdered Smith and John
believes a is insane.

(32d) works the same as sentences like (30) and (31).

Notice that logical representations do not necessarily determine truth conditions (by themselves at least). SR-2's various understandings do not affect the truth value of (30) for example, while they do affect the truth value of (32) for example. I see no reason why truth conditions should be solely determinable by one level of an over-all combined theory of grammar and other cognitive systems.

FOOTNOTES

1. The literature is now massive and there is little point to citing any fair sample of it here. See Quine (1960) for the start of much of the modern discussion.

I am indebted to many people for comments, criticisms, and discussion on the issues involved in this paper, especially to J.M.E. Moravcsik, R. Oehrie, and T. Wasow (Stanford); M. Kiteley (Smith); C. Witherspoon (Hampshire); and H. Heidelberger (University of Massachusetts). While none of the above necessarily agrees with what I have to say here, I deeply appreciate their help.

2. See Reinhart (1975) and Gee (1975) for some problems with these sorts of paraphrases.

3. I use the term "intentional" for operators like "believe", "know", "see", "remember", "intend"... , etc., reserving the term "intensional" for operators of logical necessity and possibility and cases in general not keyed to a "psychological agent".

4. See Austin (1965), pp. 343-344). I do not have the time or space in this paper to discuss the "intensional" cases--for my views on these in relation to the sort of position developed here see Gee (1975: Ch. 3).

5. Indefinites have different entailment relations though:
- i. "The man who murdered Smith is insane" (DD) entails "if x murdered Smith then x is insane".
 - ii. "A Frenchman cooked this meal" (DD) does not entail "if x is a Frenchman then x cooked this meal".

This difference actually falls out of my more formal account later in the paper but I do not have the space here to show in detail how.

6. My account, I believe, captures what is true in the "higher performative verb" analysis in this area without postulating this as a correct theory of syntactic or semantic representations.

7. My account of conceptual truths and their relationship to assertion-challenge-assertion series is indebted to the account in Wheatly (1969), where the exs. in (20) and (22) come from. The conceptual truth in (23) is an emanation of one in Wheatly's paper. See also Austin (1965).

8. The schema in A-C works for definites (e.g. S = the man who murdered Smith, P = insane). The case with indefinites, due to the facts in fn. 9 above, is somewhat different. For now, in the case of "A Frenchman cooked this meal", take S to be "The person who cooked this meal" and P to be "a Frenchman". The slightly more formal treatment I give later captures the similarity between the two cases in terms of the use of an ambiguous name in both cases.

9. What I am calling "conceptual truths" (see Wheatly (1970) for an explication of what this means) bear an important relationship to what Wittgenstein (1958) called "grammatical propositions" and to his notion of "grounds" (non-declarative, non-inductive criteria).

10. These cases were originally brought to my attention by Richard Oehrle.

11. For some syntactic indications that this is true see Sag (1976).

12. The question of what logical representations look like in an empirical one, here I use fairly standard logical representations in order to sketch the outlines of an explicit account of the relationship between logical representation and the understandings I am dealing with in an over-all theory of grammar and other cognitive systems. On logical representations in linguistic theory, see Sag (1976), Williams (1977), Chomsky and Lasnik (1977).

13. See Hintikka (1962). "Epistemic worlds" are all the states of affairs (possible worlds) compatible with what someone knows in the actual world. Doxastic worlds would be ones compatible with what someone believes in the actual world.

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