

Discussions

He is usually an Italian, but he isn't¹

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In a recent article “Traditionally, I am entitled to a last meal” (*Organon F* 18, 2011, No. 1) Bjørn Jespersen argued against treating the descriptive uses of indexicals as an argument for the revision of the semantics of indexicals – he opposed the view argued for by Nunberg (1991, 1992, 1993, 1995, 2004, 2004a), Recanati (1993, 2005), Kijania-Placek (2010, 2010a) and others that on their descriptive uses indexicals contribute general concepts instead of individual ones to the proposition expressed and generate general instead of singular propositions. These kind of uses were first systematically studied by Nunberg and the main paper on the subject is still his “Indexicality and deixis”. Jespersen relies on a version of Nunberg’s example and I will use it as well to explain the main idea.

Jespersen challenges the very definition of the descriptive uses of indexicals by claiming that in such cases a nonsensical proposition is being expressed but is used to communicate a related proposition that does make sense. He does not give arguments as to why we should believe that nonsense is expressed but rather provides a mechanism that shows why it is that utterances which according to him are nonsensical or sloppy take place.

I will question his arguments on two counts. First, I will question his general strategy that requires the assumption that people communicate with nonsense on a regular basis as well as his definition of a nonsensical utterance. An account that does not require interpreting speaker’s utterances as systematically nonsensical, if available, is preferable to an account that requires that. I will outline such an account, which I have proposed in (2010) and (2010a), in the last section. Additionally, I will try to show that the solution proposed by Jespersen,

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even if it worked for this particular example he considers, will not do for others and, as such, cannot provide an explanation of the phenomenon in question.

Jespersen suggests that before

attempting to carry out a semantic analysis, I recommend first making it unambiguous and explicit what the intended message is and only then feeding the resulting sanitized, quasi-natural linguistic fragment into the machine of semantic analysis. (p. 6-7)

This recommendation is ambiguous but I tend to agree with its liberal reading: semantic analysis requires some level of abstraction from the context and that is what I will assume in my analysis as well. We must just be careful not to abstract from those elements of the context that are truth-conditionally relevant. After all, most sentences of natural language do not have truth-conditions unless uttered in a particular context. Take a simple sentence like "He left his umbrella at home". This sentence, if abstracted from a context of use, does not have truth conditions. I do not just mean that we do not know the referent of "he" (or "his") on its deictic use - It is rather a matter of context whether it is a deictic use at all. As Kaplan put it, "[p]ronouns are lexically ambiguous, having both an anaphoric and a demonstrative use" (Kaplan 1989, 572). If this sentence is a conversation starter, it may only be interpreted deictically, otherwise it may be anaphoric on previous terms. In this respect, descriptive uses are no different. It is a matter of context, be it linguistic or extralinguistic, whether an indexical is interpreted deictically, anaphorically (in the standard sense) or descriptively. I will argue that contextual considerations that are indispensable in disambiguating the sentence are sufficient in providing a structure of the proposition expressed.

Referring to

(1) Traditionally, I am entitled to a last meal,

Jespersen says that "the sentence as it stands is nonsense, in the light sense of nonsense that its truth-condition cannot possibly be satisfied" (p. 7). But couldn't the same be said about "He left his umbrella at home" uttered as a stand-alone sentence on the grounds that it does not have an antecedent? Yet I doubt that we judge this sentence nonsensical; we rather interpret this use of "he" as deictic and give it non-anaphoric truth conditions. So it is not the case that every sentence has

one type of truth conditions and is classified as nonsense if those truth-conditions are not satisfied, because indexical sentences have at least two types of truth-conditions. I think that the deictic truth-conditions take preference and we apply anaphoric truth conditions just because deictic are not applicable. The actual order is, however, not important for the argument and I will not argue for it here. An acute reader of Jespersen's paper might insist that he used the phrase "its truth-condition cannot possibly be satisfied" and I seem to forget about the force of "possibly" here. I do not think that it matters. Since for indexical sentences there is no such thing as "its" truth conditions, if we mean by that one set of truth-conditions, in the definition of nonsense we would require that neither of its conditions can possibly be satisfied. Yet once we abandon the comfort of having "the" truth-conditions for a sentence, there is always the question of considering still other possible truth-conditions before declaring something as nonsense. In my analysis I indeed postulate a third kind of truth conditions for indexicals.

Basing his argument on examples like (1), repeated here:

(1) Traditionally, I am entitled to a last meal,

Jespersen claims that such sentences are a result of combining two sentences into one by applying an invalid rule of universal instantiation inside the scope of "traditionally":

Traditionally, $F(x) \rightarrow G(x)$

$F(a)$

Traditionally $G(a)$

For this example the premises are "Traditionally, if somebody is a condemned prisoner then they are entitled to a last meal." and "I am a condemned prisoner." (p. 7-8). According to Jespersen "this [...] inference is the logical backbone of what enables the competent hearer to make sense of what the prisoner intends to say" (p. 8), which is that "[t]he prisoner wants to be served a last meal" (p. 7). It might sound all right in this particular case, but Jespersen claims that this kind of reasoning is a general schema, a template, that fits all cases of descriptive uses of indexicals (p. 9, 10). Yet if we applied it to another of Nunberg's examples, it would yield unwanted results. Imagine some-

one gesturing towards John Paul II, as he delivers a speech with a Polish accent shortly after his election, saying:²

- (2) He is usually an Italian, but this time they thought it wise to elect a Pole.

If we apply Jespersen’s schema to (2) we would get the following inference:

Usually, if somebody is the Pope, he is an Italian.
John Paul II is the Pope.

John Paul II is an Italian. (or John Paul II is usually an Italian)

or

Usually, if somebody is the Pope, he is an Italian.
He is the Pope.

He is an Italian. (or He is usually an Italian)

Since in the second premise “he” refers to John Paul II (that much follows from the context), there is no important difference between the two schemas. This kind of reasoning is invalid and Jespersen is explicit about that, yet he claims that the conclusion reached in this fallacious way helps the hearer figure out the intended meaning - “what the speaker intends to convey” (p. 6). But what is the mechanism by which the hearer goes from the conclusion to the intended meaning? Clearly, in (2) the speaker in no way claims that John Paul II is Italian, he says the opposite in the second conjunct of his utterance. In fact, in the first conjunct (“He is usually an Italian”) the speaker is not communicating anything about John Paul II or any other particular individual. Rather, he is expressing a general statement about Popes. So the schema Jespersen proposes is not general but rather an ad hoc explanation that, let us assume, works for (1) and maybe some other examples for reasons that have nothing to do with the phenomenon of descriptive uses of indexicals.

In what follows, I will propose an account of how we arrive at such general propositions as that communicated by (2). I assume that indexicals have default or primary truth-conditions that are either deic-

2 This is Recanati’s version of Nunberg’s example (Recanati 2005, 297; Nunberg 1992).

tic or anaphoric (in the standard sense) but additionally have secondary descriptive truth-conditions which I call quasi-anaphoric. The secondary nature of the last consists in the fact that they are triggered but failures of the primary truth conditions. In (2010) and (2010a) I distinguish three types of descriptive uses of indexicals but here I will concentrate on the first type as all the examples Jespersen mentions as well as (2) are of that type.

From a default semantic point of view, “he,” as used in (2), refers to a particular person present in the context (anaphoric interpretation is excluded by the assumption that (2) is a conversation starter). “Usually,” on the other hand, is a general quantifier that in this context quantifies over a set of people.³ After all it is people who are Italian. Thus “he” presupposes singularity, while the quantifier excludes it. Therefore the sentence is inconsistent⁴ and we do not interpret “he” deictically but rather seek its, as I call it, quasi-anaphoric antecedent in the context, such that would yield a set of people. The antecedent is the object given by the linguistic meaning – Kaplanian character (in the case of pure indexicals) or by demonstration in the case of demonstratives. For (2) the antecedent is the object being demonstrated – John Paul II. As with any anaphoric antecedent, the object is not a referent of “he”. It points to the object’s salient property. So we look for a salient property of the person that is demonstrated; here it is

³ “Usually” is a sort of binary majority quantifier and its logic is a standard generalized quantifiers logic (see for example Barwise – Cooper 1981, Peters – Westerståhl 2006). The reservations about “always” in the next footnote apply to “usually” as well.

⁴ In the paper Jespersen cites (Kijania-Placek 2010) I have claimed that sentences such as “Today is always the biggest party day of the year” are semantically inconsistent. While I still maintain that they are inconsistent, I have been since persuaded by Francois Recanati, Peter Pagin and others that the incoherence is not of purely semantic nature. I now think that the semantics of most adverbs of quantification does not specify what kind of entities these adverbs quantify over. Although in this particular sentence “always” does quantify over days, it can quantify over events that can take part in one day. In such a case “always” would not conflict with “today”. (Compare Kijania-Placek (submitted)) But since it is a matter of context what adverbs of quantification quantify over, the incoherence of the sentence is not strictly semantic. See Lewis (1975).

“pope.” This property is the semantic value of the pronoun but is not a referent of the pronoun⁵ – it serves as a context set for the general quantifier that triggered the quasi-anaphoric interpretation in the first place and which constrains the structure of the general proposition being expressed. In the case of (2) it is:

Usually_x (pope(x), Italian(x)),

“Popes are usually Italian” – which accords with the intuition of the message conveyed by (2) by not saying anything about John Paul II in particular. It gives the correct result for (1) as well:

Traditionally_x(condemned prisoner(x), is entitled to a last meal(x)).

Only because ‘traditionally’ is a generalization and because the fact that the speaker belongs to the context set is manifest to the speakers, it follows from his utterance (on the pattern of “if $\forall x (\varphi(x), \psi(x))$ and $\varphi(a)$, then $\psi(a)$ ”) that he is entitled to a last meal. But that is what follows from his utterance, not what he says. What he says is the general proposition that condemned are traditionally entitled to a last meal. Had it happened that he is granted a pardon at the last moment, he would be the first to admit that he is after all not entitled.⁶ “Usually” on the other hand is a majority quantifier and as such does not justify analogical entailment.

In general, a quasi-anaphoric interpretation of the type exemplified by (1) and (2) is triggered at the level of linguistic meaning by the use of quantifying words such as ‘traditionally,’ ‘always,’ or ‘usually’ in contexts in which they quantify over the same kind of entities that the indexicals refer to on their default interpretations. In such contexts their meanings clash with the singularity of the default referential reading of the indexicals. As a result, we search for discourse antecedents of the pronouns yet the antecedents are not supplied explicitly by the linguistic contexts but are rather objects identified through the

⁵ Thus I am in verbal agreement with Jespersen when he claims that indexicals are not vehicles of general reference, but that is probably not what he means but his claim. For an argument why descriptively used indexicals are not vehicles of general reference see Kijania-Placek (submitted).

⁶ And the derivation would no longer be sound, because the second premise would not be true.

linguistic meanings of the pronouns (in case of pure indexicals) or by demonstration (for demonstratives). The objects are used as pointers to properties corresponding to them in a contextually salient manner. The context must be very specific in order to supply just one such property, which explains why there are not many convincing examples of the felicitous use of descriptive indexicals.

With respect to the correctness of the descriptive uses of indexicals, Jespersen claims that “the competent hearer is someone who both knows what the speaker intends to say and also knows that they are not saying it quite right” (p. 9). I must admit that I find such utterances like “He is usually an Italian” (context the same as for (2)) quite natural and correct. I want to emphasize the fact that in the utterance the pronoun “he” is used only once. Had it been used twice, as in the title of this paper

(3) He is usually an Italian, but he isn't,

it would be a clear case of a playful use of words, as is the case with most jokes that rely on an equivocation. In (3) the equivocation is between the first occurrence of “he”, where it is used descriptively, and the second, where it must be assumed to be used deictically to avoid contradiction. Nothing like that happens in (2), where “he” is uttered only once.

Of course, the descriptive uses of indexicals are not a reliable means of communication and, as such, will not be encountered when precision is at stake. They rely on the contextual salience of a property of an individual and require that this salience be shared by the participants of the discourse. The context must be very specific to supply just one such property. Often the salience is not shared and communication fails. Yet descriptive uses of indexicals, if felicitous, are not fallacious or otherwise incorrect. A semanticist is forced to that conclusion only if he assumes that words have meanings outside of sentences and particular occurrences, meanings rich enough to give those words' propositional constituents. Only then there is a problem with assuming that “I” does not refer to the speaker in the above sentence. But even if that much is granted to the semanticist, he/she would still have problem with simpler cases like “John and Jane entered the room and John kissed her.” Nothing in the structure of this sentence tells us whether “her” is used anaphorically, referring to Jane, or deictically, re-

ferring instead to some other salient female. The sentence is ambiguous between at least these two readings and the ambiguity can only be resolved by context. But if the semanticist would be willing to grant that much, why not to allow for other variations in the semantics of particular words?

I agree with Jespersen that what is analyzed by a semantics of natural language is really an ideal language “quasi-natural” or “crisp”, as he put it. I do not agree that an adequate analysis may judge systematically successful utterances as nonsensical. An analysis of natural language should be sensitive to facts of the language actual use. If a semantic theory predicts as nonsensical utterances which are systematically used in successful communication, I am inclined to treat such predictions as a refutation of the theory, or at least a call for revision.

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