Travis on Reference, Speakers and Semantics

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Abstract

Kripke (1977) introduces a distinction between speaker's reference and semantic reference. Kripke claims that referential expressions such as definite descriptions, proper names, and indexicals have a semantic reference, which they refer to in virtue of their meaning, and which provides their truth-conditional content. Speaker reference is determined by a speaker's *specific intention* to refer to an object on an occasion, even if the expression used is not conventionally used for such a referent. Travis (1981), a largely unknown paper, argues that there is a genuine natural language phenomenon of reference, in accordance with the judgments of speakers of English, but that neither of Kripke's notions capture this phenomenon. In my paper, I present some of Travis's arguments against Kripke's distinction, and consider their effectiveness, focussing in particular on the connection between semantic reference and the reference of proper names. I suggest that, although not discussed by him explicitly, Travis's reference is closely tied to communication in a way that neither of Kripke's notions of reference are.

Travis's arguments against the idea that the reference of proper names is determined by their semantics are limited in their effectiveness because they mostly focus on the problem of shared names, which is avoided by current accounts of proper names. In the main section of my paper I show how the spirit of Travis's objections to semantic reference can be extended to to criticize two modern views on proper names: the *homophonist* view, and the *indexicalist* view. Homophonism holds that proper names refer *tout court* in virtue of a causal-chain linking the name either to the object or to an originating baptism. According to homophonists, a name's semantic content just is its referent, but they are able to avoid the problem of names having multiple bearers by claiming that in fact these are merely multiple, homophonous names, which are individuated according to their causal history. Indexicalism is the view that proper names are context-sensitive expressions like indexicals or demonstrative pronouns, with a semantic character which takes particular contextual parameters as arguments, and returns a reference.

I argue that semantic reference as described by homophonism fails to account for reference because its explanation for how reference is possible, given the existence of apparently shared names, does not turn on how speakers actually use names to communicate. It results in the possibility of speakers being in a position whereby they are semantically referring to a particular object, in virtue of their use of a name being causally connected to it, but neither they, nor their audience, is able to distinguish the referent from multiple, equally plausible candidates. Indexicalism fails to account for reference because it is in principle unable to provide the kind of determinate contextual parameters to determine the correct reference in ever case of name use.

References

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Travis, C. (1981). "Reference, Speakers and Semantics". In: *Language & Communication* 1, pp. 13–38.