

Sense, Reference and Rule-Following

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In a series of important and provocative books, Jerry Katz has articulated and defended a ‘Platonistic Intensionalism’ in the theory of meaning. As Jerry understands it, this is the view that expressions of a natural language have sense as well as reference, that senses are abstract entities of some sort and that they that are the proper objects of study in a theory of meaning for natural language. As both his admirers and detractors would admit, that is the essence of the view that Frege successfully placed at the center of the philosophy of language as we know it.

Much of Jerry’s most recent book is devoted to an extensive confrontation with Quine and Wittgenstein —in Jerry’s eyes, this century’s most trenchant critics of intensionalism.¹ Jerry’s point in confronting these philosophers, however, isn’t merely to stare them down, arguing that their attacks on intensionalism are, for one or another reason, ineffective. His much more interesting goal is to argue

¹Parenthetically, I should say that I think there is some question about whether Wittgenstein can rightly be cast in this role, but I cannot argue this exegetical issue here.

that, whereas the classic arguments of Quine and Wittgenstein are effective against Frege's version of intensionalism, they are ineffective against his own different brand. The overall polemical purpose, then, is not merely to defend intensionalism against extensionalism, but to promote a Katzian new intensionalism over its traditional Fregean rival, by showing that it is only the new intensionalism that evades the clutches of Quine's and Wittgenstein's skeptical arguments. As this description suggests, it is a breathtakingly ambitious effort, covering a broad range of fundamental issues in the philosophy of language and mind, yet somehow not at the cost of argumentative detail. Even before reading *The Metaphysics of Meaning*, I was in broad sympathy with many of its central tenets—especially its Platonism, commitment to senses, and anti-naturalism. Reading it has done much to reinforce those convictions. However, I do have some questions about the claimed advantages of Jerry's own particular brand of intensionalism and it is that issue that I wish to concentrate upon in this piece.

1

Where, precisely, are we supposed to locate the crucial difference between the new intensionalism and the repudiated old intensionalism of Frege? Jerry says:

The rejection of Frege's conception of the relation between sense and reference is the cornerstone of the intensionalism I have developed. . . (p. 126)

And just as expected, it is this feature of Fregean intensionalism that is held responsible for generating all the nasty problems:

The [new intensionalism] does not define sense derivatively in terms of reference or think of sense as containing rules of use. As a consequence, the theory does not lead to [an] approach on which sense determines reference or makes sense responsible for rules that specify use in advance. As we shall see. . . thinking of meaning as something in which "all the steps are already taken" is one of the things that makes an intensionalism vulnerable to Wittgenstein's paradox about following rules. (p. 129)

The key, then, to the new intensionalism is the rejection of the claim that sense determines reference. But how exactly is this to be understood?

In denying that sense determines reference, one thing that Jerry has in mind is the claim that, owing to contextual pragmatic reasons,

the sense of a given token may be different from the sense of the type of which it is a token. Jerry gives the example of the householder who says “He’s a cat”, referring to a burglar who got in by walking a narrow pipe (p. 144). In such a case, he claims, even if the sense of the token does determine the reference of the token, still the sense of the type doesn’t. And so that is one way in which sense might be said not to determine reference.

In effect, Jerry is assuming in this example that an expression token used metaphorically expresses something other than its ‘literal’ sense. I don’t know whether this is the right account of metaphor; certainly many writers on the subject have disputed it. But it is quite clear that uniformity of sense across expression tokens is not central to a broadly Fregean conception of meaning, and so I shall let it pass. The crucial question for such a conception concerns the relation between the sense of a token and its reference: Does the sense of a token determine its reference in a context-independent way? Of course, even Frege realized that the answer had to be ‘No’ for indexical expressions like ‘I’, ‘here’ and ‘now’. But it is the fundamental contention of a Fregean semantics that for other sorts of expression, in particular, for non-indexical singular terms and for general terms, their sense determines their reference. Does Jerry mean to be denying this thesis?

He does; but if I understand him correctly, the way in which he seeks to deny it is extremely unusual. Let me explain.

Suppose we have a token word, say, ‘cube’ and we take it as given that it expresses a certain sense, the abstract object CUBE. Why might someone believe that the sense of the token fails to determine a reference for it? It is hard to see how someone could come to believe this for some reason other than this: Senses are, by their nature, not the sorts of objects that have underived extensions — their intrinsic, non-relational, context-invariant properties do not suffice to determine extensions for them. That is why the sense of a token expression does not determine a reference for it.

On this view, in other words, it is because of a fact about the nature of senses that the sense-determines-reference principle is rejected. And as I indicated, it is hard to see how the principle might be rejected on some other basis. For how would it go? Suppose that the intrinsic, non-relational properties of a sense, say of CUBE, did suffice to determine an extension for it — say, the set of cubes; and that it is furthermore given that some token word ‘cube’ expresses CUBE. So, the token word expresses CUBE; and it is a fact about CUBE that it is true of all and only cubes. So, presumably, our token word, too, is true of all and only cubes. Where’s the room

for play here? How could the token word not have the extension of the sense that it avowedly expresses? How could the word mean: REGULAR SOLID OF SIX EQUAL SQUARE SIDES, and yet fail to apply to something just in case it is a regular solid of six equal square sides?

For all the prima facie elusiveness of this view, it appears to be at the heart of Jerry's way of looking at things. When Jerry says that for him sense does not determine reference, he doesn't mean what a 'narrow content' theorist would mean by this, namely, that senses aren't the sorts of things that can determine their own extensions; he means, rather, that although senses are the sorts of things that determine their own extensions, nevertheless, the extension of a given token expression need not be identical with the extension of the sense that it expresses.

Now, this is a distinctive and original view. However, I have to say that I don't find it terribly plausible. Nor do I clearly see what major problems in the philosophy of language it is going to help with.

2

Beginning with the first point, Jerry describes the following example in support of his view. We imagine Cotton Mather saying (p. 145): "There are some witches around these parts".² On Jerry's view, Mather here is using the word "witch" with its literal sense, namely, woman with magic powers obtained from an evil spirit. However, Jerry maintains, the reference of the token expression is not the extension determined by that sense, namely the empty set; the word "witch" on that occasion referred to certain actual local women, despite the fact that they were not witches.

I don't find this example persuasive. If Jerry's description of it were right, we would have to conclude that when Cotton Mather said "There are some witches around these parts", he said something true—for on his view, what Mather said was true iff certain women, who happened to live in the area, lived in the area; whereas it seems to me that the intuitively correct description of the case has Mather saying something false. The right account, as I see it, is that Cotton Mather was referring to no one, although, of course, he incorrectly took himself to be referring to certain local women. He said:

²The example sentence is my own. In the book, no sentence is specified, though Jerry confirms in conversation that my choice conforms to his intentions.

“There are some witches around these parts”. He meant: **THERE ARE SOME WOMEN WITH MAGIC POWERS OBTAINED FROM AN EVIL SPIRIT AROUND THESE PARTS.** This sense (proposition) is true if and only if there are some women with magic powers etc... around these parts. But there aren’t (there being no witches anywhere). Therefore, Mather was referring to no one and what he said was false.

Jerry seems to believe that his view is simply a plausible generalization of the phenomenon, noted by Donnellan, of a token definite description that ends up referring to something other than the referent picked out by its sense. But it is very unclear to me that Donnellan’s phenomenon can be supposed to generalize to general terms and to predicates in the manner that Jerry supposes.

In the Donnellan example, a woman observes a man at a party standing in a corner with a champagne glass in his hand. She says to a friend: “The man in the corner drinking champagne is tall”. As it happens, however, the man in question has nothing stronger than sparkling water in his glass, whereas in the corner behind the woman, and utterly unobserved by her, there is a tall man drinking champagne. Donnellan’s widely accepted point was that, despite the fact that the man behind the woman was picked out by the sense that she expressed, nevertheless she was referring to the man with the water in his glass and not to this other guy whom she had neither observed nor otherwise shown any interest in.

This is, of course, entirely correct. But the reason for its correctness doesn’t seem to me to generalize to general terms and predicates and so does little to support Jerry’s central claim. The reason we find it overwhelmingly plausible to say in Donnellan’s case that the referent was the non-satisfier is because it is so clearly the case that it is that man that the woman had in mind and of whom she falsely believed that he was drinking champagne. The man with the champagne in his glass was simply not in the picture: why should we suppose her to have been talking about him, when she didn’t even seem to be aware of his existence?

But it is presumably not the case that when people use general terms and predicates they similarly have some specific set of things in mind which are clearly the intended extension of the term as then used and which may, on analogy with the Donnellan case, override the extension determined by the sense. If I say “The library contains 3 million volumes” I obviously do not mean that the library contains this that and the other specific volumes; I mean that the library contains 3 million objects satisfying a certain condition, namely that of being books.

3

So much, then, for why I think that Jerry's distinctive view is implausible. But I also want to question his claim that adopting it would help us solve crucial problems in the philosophy of language, in particular that it would help us avoid some of the meaning-skeptical arguments of Quine and Wittgenstein. Here I will have space only to look at the connection with the famous problem about rule-following.

How might adopting Jerry's brand of Platonistic intensionalism help with the rule-following paradox? Let us look at the version developed by Kripke, a version Jerry discusses in detail.³ The challenge is to specify what fact about me could possibly constitute my meaning addition by my '+' sign. Kripke outlines two problems; I shall concentrate on one of them, the problem posed by the infinitary character of meaning. Let me state it very crudely. Suppose the meaning of '+' were its extension. Then the fact that I mean addition by '+' directly implies that, as I use the expression, it applies correctly to precisely this infinite set of triples, and not, for example, to the infinite set of triples that corresponds to the function of quaddition (a function that differs from addition only at a previously unencountered singularity). But, what fact about my finite mind discriminates between the hypothesis that I mean addition and the hypothesis that I mean quaddition? In company with some other philosophers, I am inclined to think that this is an important and difficult question, one which has yet to receive a satisfactory answer.

Is this difficulty avoidable by introducing senses to serve as the meanings of our arithmetical expressions, which would then determine these infinitary extensions? According to Kripke, not:

There is no special problem, for this position, as to the relation between the sense and the referent it determines. It simply is in the nature of a sense to determine a referent. But ultimately the skeptical problem cannot be evaded, and it arises precisely in the question how the existence in my mind of any mental entity... can constitute 'grasping' any particular sense rather than another. The idea in my mind is a finite object: can it not be interpreted as determining a quus function rather a plus function? (p. 54)

The subtle point that Kripke is relying on here is that it is as hard to explain how a finite mind might grasp an infinite object—such as the

³Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

addition table— directly, as it is to explain how it might grasp something that uniquely determines such an infinite object. For in the relevant sense, an object that uniquely determines an infinite object itself has an infinite number of individuating conditions, and hence is itself an infinite object. If, then, there is a problem about grasping infinite extensions, that problem simply resurfaces for senses.

Jerry seems to believe that this problem simply does not arise for his view:

On [my] intensionalist position, . . . [we] have only to relate a finite mental entity . . . to a finite objective entity (the sense itself). The feature of projection, which causes the underdetermination, is absent. (p. 173)

But I am mystified by how he could think this. As we have seen, Jerry's senses, just like Frege's, determine extensions; all that Jerry denies is that the extension so determined by a sense is necessarily the extension of a token expressing that sense. But, then, and as I have briefly explained above, these senses are in every relevant respect themselves infinitary objects, subject to the problem about rule-following. In any event, it is hard for me to see how Jerry's brand of intensionalism has any advantage here over Frege's, for they agree about the only feature that matters in the present connection, namely, that senses determine their own extensions.⁴

⁴I am grateful to Jerry Katz for many interesting and enjoyable conversations about these topics.