

Readings, by Paul Dekker

A sentence, however identified, has as many readings as it gets. This is something I take very literally and believe very firmly. Linguists and philosophers have, however, focused on types of readings that sentences may get, thereby assuming or postulating various kinds of (non-)ambiguity of (types of) sentences. These investigations have, of course, been very useful and illuminating, but should eventually answer the question of how the distinct types of readings that sentences are assigned relate to the actual readings that sentences do get. This is a principled question, because, by definition, *any* theoretical analysis of a sentence, no matter how absurd, constitutes *de facto* a reading of the sentence, and might thereby threaten to render the whole enterprise meaningless.

Interestingly, linguists and philosophers have for as far as I can see not systematically related to this question, and I want to deliver an attempt to do so with the following preliminary definitions. A sentence type is said to be *unambiguous* iff the readings that its instances get are *identified*, except those that are reasonably and relevantly *disqualified* as deviant. A sentence type is said to be *ambiguous* iff there is a recognizable and relevant *distinction* between at least two classes of readings that instances of the sentence have. We can of course try and make these ‘definitions’ somewhat more uniform — by saying that a sentence type is considered unambiguous iff it has a class of readings which all count as the same reading, all other readings being disqualified, and ambiguous iff it has two or more such classes, which are recognizably distinct — but for the present purposes the above will do. The, provisional, definitions deliberately construe ambiguity as the result of a practice, which is as vague and contextual, and theoretically biased, as the identification, disqualification and distinction of readings is — a point that I consider theoretically unnegotiable.

Consider the following two sentences.

- (1) Ron is a student.
- (2) Smith’ murderer is insane.

Sentences like (1) are generally considered unambiguous, and quite rightly so, even though, of course, (i) “Ron”, conceived of as a proper name here, may be used to refer to whole number of different Ron’s, and even though (ii) the notion of ‘a student’ may, systematically, vary from occasion to occasion. With regard to (i) we may however find it theoretically immaterial which Ron the readings of (1) are concerned with (I believe this would be the standard, theoretical, inclination), or we might focus on a particular Ron we know, and disqualify all readings that are not about this Ron, the ‘real’ one (I believe this would be the most practical inclination). With regard to (ii), there are of course, e.g., administrative, circumstances in which a relevant recognizable distinction should be made between being a student in the sense of being officially registered as such, and between being a student as a way of life, as displaying some characteristic behavior as such, or even otherwise. In such circumstances it would be reasonable to render (1) ambiguous. However, since all predicates seem to display similar variations in meaning for which in principle circumstances can be found in which such semantic distinctions can play up, it would for the time being not be reasonable to systematically anticipate such possible distinctions,

and hence stick to rendering (1) unambiguous, identify the varieties of readings of “is a student”, and delegate a special language game of disambiguation to those involved in circumstances like the ones mentioned.

As concerns sentences like (2), and with reservations about being Smith, a murderer, and about being insane similar to those for example (1), there has already been a debate whether or not such sentences are ambiguous between what has been called a referential and an attributive reading. It will not do to repeat or even summarize the whole debate, but it seems fair to observe that whatever outcome it is, it is one that its proponents consider theoretically the most attractive one. Few people seem to seriously maintain that there are purely empirical data that support either one of the theses without theoretical back up. Any such decision, even if no decision is made, thus aligns with the pragmatic approach advocated here.

Now consider the following two examples somehow stipulated to be ambiguous.

(3) The cake is tasty.

(4) Pierre believes that London is pretty.

There is a solid ground in linguistics and philosophy for rendering the truth of (3) dependent on some judge, or some other external parameter that behaves similarly. Different ‘judges’, however called, may entertain different concepts, or standards, of tasty and thereby initiate different readings of sentence (3), viz., the different propositions that the cake is tasty-according-to-those-standards. Now while I do agree that in occasional circumstances of so-called ‘faultless disagreement’, one should actually distinguish between such different readings of ‘tasty’, it would be a hopeless track to think of (3) as systematically ambiguous between as many readings of tasty that there can be, for one thing because the scale of tasty-findings can by no means be considered discrete—except, as said, on occasion. The solution to the problems people have with (3) must be sought and can be found elsewhere.

Besides the various concepts of beliefs, and the various construals of (4) as, e.g., *de re* or *de dicto*, there is a, very attractive, proposal for rendering the truth of the *de re* construal of (4) dependent on the so-called *conceptual cover* that the interlocutors entertain, on their conceptualization of the domain of discourse. Relative to one such cover the sentence, even read *de re* can be considered true, while relative to another the sentence, equally read *de re* is judged false. The sentence, upon its *de re* construal, thus is predicted to have as many readings as there are conceptual covers, and formally they are presented as different types of readings. Here as well, it seems reasonable to doubt that we cannot read (4) without a full conceptualization of the universe of discourse, and to assume that we only need some knowledge of who and what Pierre and London are, and some understanding of the relation between the two, which we can, of course, consider to be opaque and circumstantially determined. The conclusion being that a revision of the semantic framework to account for the multiplicity of readings should not need to be called for.

In my talk I will present the above ideas and analyses in some more detail and it is expected and hoped that the workshop will generate more examples which can be evaluated along the lines advocated here.