

Readings (Some Reflections)

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Workshop
Ambiguity: Perspectives on Representation and Resolution
August 6–10, 2018

Adam Sennet (SEP)

[Citing the Oxford English Dictionary]

*The term “Ambiguous” is ambiguous
between Being Doubtful and HAVING MULTIPLE MEANINGS.*

[Even if Ambiguous means AMBIGUOUS, it is still *Ambiguous*.]

[Adam Sennet, 2016, “Ambiguity”, in: Edward N. Zalta (ed.),
The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stanford.]

Gottlob Frege

The term “Meaning” is ambiguous between SINN UND BEDEUTUNG.

(Between MEANING and MEANING, that is.)

[That makes three readings, actually.]

[Google translates: *meaning and meaning* (English), *betekenis en betekenis* (Dutch), *significado y significado* (Spanish), *significato e significato* (Italian), *sens et signification* (French), *smysl i znachenije* (Russian).]

[Michael Beaney: { *Sense, Meaning* } and { *Reference, Meaning, Denotation, Significance, Indication, Nominatum, Bedeutung* }.]

[Michael Beaney, 1997, *The Frege Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford.]

Timm & Christian & Lucia

Linguistics symbols can, and usually have, two or more (...) interpretations from which the hearer has to choose a specific one without being explicitly told to do so.

- (a) Do *the symbols* HAVE these interpretations? (From what?)
- (b) Does *a hearer* HAVE to choose? (For what?)

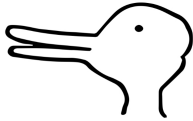
What is it that needs representing and what needs resolving?

- (i) What are the things that are ambiguous?
- (ii) What are they ambiguous between?
- (iii) How do you individuate these things?
- (iv) For what purpose do you do that?

[Timm Lichte and Christian Wurm, 2018, “Ambiguity: Perspectives on Representation and resolution”, *ESSLLI*, Sofia.]

[Lucia Gomez Alvarez, 2018, “Ambiguity”, *ESSLLI*, Sofia.]

Ludwig Wittgenstein



duck
 rabbit
 neither
 BOTH

[Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1953, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* II, Blackwell, §xi.]

Names and Predicates (Apresjan/Bezuidenhout)

Ron is a student.

$ron_i^x, STUDENT_j^Y$
$Y[x]$

- Cases of “homonymy” and “regular polysemy”.
- Can be contextually resolved, and can remain unresolved.

This apple is red.

...
$Y[_i x]_i$

- Alternative ways in which a predicate is applied to a subject may constitute alternative readings.
- On a real occasion of use, the “ambiguities” are resolved.
- If not, and if relevant, just ask.

Assumptions

- There is no such thing as the meaning of a sentence (/ word).
- We are able to recognize the occurrence of sentences (/ words).
- We interpret these occurrences in their context and relative to a theory of interpretation.
- Every interpretation is unique and constitutes a reading.
- We ignore or disqualify ‘impossible’ readings, and identify and distinguish among the rest.

[Paul Dekker, 2017, “Live Meanings”, in: Kata Balogh and Wiebke Petersen (eds.), *Bridging Formal and Conceptual Semantics*, Düsseldorf UP, pp. 13–37.]

Reference (Kripke)

Smith’s murderer is insane.

Jones is raking the leaves.

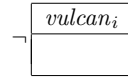
Their “Water” is not H₂O.

- pragmatic ambiguity (Donnellan) • theoretical identification (Putnam) • intuitive expectations (Kripke)
- more economical theory (Fodor and Sag) •

$jones_i^x$	$RAKE_K^Y$
	$Y[x]$

Existence (Wikipedia)

Vulcan does not exist.



- Possible objects? The Vulcanizer? Scope?

“‘Vulcan’ may refer to:

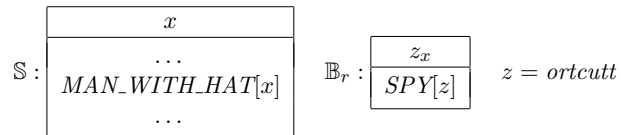
- ▶ ...
- ▶ the god of fire
- ▶ a fictional race in Star Trek
- ▶ a gay pornography magazine
- ▶ a hypothetical planet
- ▶ ...”

- ..., exist, subsist, be there, ...
- No *Bedeutung*, a specific SINN, many tentative construals, yet fairly unambiguous. [Outside of linguistic-philosophical circles.]

Sinn (Aloni)

Ralph believes that Ortcutt is a spy.

Pierre believes that London is pretty.



- We may on occasion negotiate an ambiguity in the *Sinn* of a name, but preferably we don't have to. (Frege 1892)

Mr. Multi-Famous and Mr. Nobody (Russell)

Οὐτιν ἐγὼ πύματον ἔδομαι μετὰ οἷς ἐτάροισιν,
τοὺς δ' ἄλλους πρόσθεν·
Nobody will I eat last, the others first. (Book 9, line 369–70)

- There is only one way of making sense of this, in the *Odyssee*.

Οὐτίς με κτείνει δόλῳ οὐδὲ βίηφι.
Nobody is slaying me by guile, not by force. (Book 9, line 408)

- There are two ways of making sense of this, in the *Odyssee*.

Relativity (McFarlane)

The cake is tasty.

This music is country.

Marcus is a communist.

Henriëtte is an expert.

The inference is valid.

The solar system hosts nine planets.

- An extremely regular source of ambiguity, which is equally regularly resolved or dismissed.

Modifiers (Lambek)

superfluous hair remover (Sennet)

ordinary language philosophy (Austin)

huge gay fan (Friends)

Onder het omstreden vonnis in de rechtszaak over de peperdure grond rond Schiphol ligt de schijn van ordinaire vriendjespolitiek. (Endt)

- Another systematic source of (structural, potential) ambiguity.
- Not necessarily distinct, neither necessarily syntactic:

$$\begin{array}{ccc}
 N/N & N & N \backslash N \\
 [\text{huge} \bullet [\text{gay} \bullet \text{fan}]] & \Rightarrow & \text{huge} _ \text{gay} _ \text{fan} \\
 \text{huge} & \text{gay} & \text{fan} \\
 & & \text{fan}(\text{huge}(\text{gay}))
 \end{array}$$

$$\text{BECAUSE: } \begin{array}{ccc}
 N & N \backslash N & (N/N) \backslash N \\
 [\text{gay} \bullet \text{fan}] & \Rightarrow & \text{gay} _ \text{fan} \\
 \text{gay} & \text{fan} & \lambda h \text{ fan}(h(\text{gay}))
 \end{array}$$

Construal (Gillon)

A und B oder C

- It's in France and in Toulon or in Paris.
- A and (THEN/BUT) B or (EXCL) C
- Barwise and Groenendijk or Stokhof proved the theorem first. Groenendijk and Stokhof or Barwise proved the theorem first.
- The context may indicate how the ambiguity has to be resolved, or even if it has to.

Scope (Pietroski & Hornstein)

Does Every Sentence Like This Exhibit a Scope Ambiguity?

- The answer is informed by what we know about our (minimalist) grammar. It has to be negative for theoretical reasons.

The question of whether (1) [Every girl pushed some truck] (...) is structurally ambiguous in a way that supports a truth-conditional ambiguity depends on a host of considerations: the intuitions of native speakers about a range of constructions, the constraints imposed by our best theories of syntax, and the particular kind of event analysis that is best overall, etc. (p. 23)

Cumulativity and Collectivity (Scha/Bratman)

Five boys wrote seven poems.

The roads cross the lines.

The Leitches and the Latches hate each other.

The Romans wanted to rule the world.

The Greek inspired / educated the Romans.

We have been deluding ourselves.

- The most obvious readings are surely not designed or defined for the intricate models developed to distinguish among subtle linguistic analyses.

Indexicality (Sennet)

I am stupid, HE is cute and she is smart.

No_i man blamed HIS_{0,i,j} boss.

If a student corrects a professor SHE should reward him.

- One can distinguish and identify many readings.
- “[W]hether this is a semantic, syntactic or pragmatic ambiguity has been the source of heated debate.” (p. 10)

Performativity (Eckardt)

I will be there at nine.

- A: You promised! B: No, I expected!

I promise I will be there.

- I didn't break a promise! I told a lie!

Acceptability of readings depends on an established practice, a culture.

Exhaustivity (Zeevat)

I will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

- One can tell the truth without telling the whole truth?
- One can tell the truth while including something which is not.
 - Supreme court overrules the language system.

On Meanings (If Any)

Meanings, if anything, are types of interpretation of occurrences of types of expressions.

- We can use them to characterize readings and distinguish them, not to define or identify them.
- The above investigations suggest that:
 - ▶ every meaning can be ambiguous.
 - ▶ every ambiguity can be spurious.

[Cf, also, Sandra, Vicente and Falkum.]

On Representations (If Any)

*A mental or logical representation presents a reading of an expression
ONLY IF it is interpreted and IF it is interpreted the same way.*

- Mental and/or logical representations do not by themselves help in providing an answer to the readings problem, although they may help in formulating the outcomes. (Husserl, Wittgenstein.)
- (Non-)Identity conditions of readings are essentially dependent on their context and the theory of interpretation.
- There is no limit on what are possible contexts, and what are possible theories of interpretation.
- So there is no worst case that we can generalize to.

Cf., “(...) *the continuous nature of the homonymy–polysemy–monosemy dimension* (...)” (Sandra p. 373, cf., also, Apresjan p. 14)

On Ambiguities (If Any)

*Ambiguity is primarily the phenomenon of
occurrences of sentences having multiple readings,
rather than that of sentences having multiple meanings.*

- A lexicon and a grammar may postulate or define meanings of types of words and sentences, perhaps as the types of readings that their occurrences may have, and this may have theoretical linguistic value.
- It does not, however, seem very likely that the kind of sentential minimalism of the Formal Semanticists, or the lexical minimalism of the Cognitive Linguists, can provide an explanatory basis for the multiplicity of readings that we actually find and want to account for.

[Lexicon and grammar perhaps tell us what a word or sentence can mean, but never what an occurrence of it does mean.]

Conclusions for the Workshop

- The practical advice for the applied linguist is to just do your job.
- We reason about actual readings, and about possible readings, and classify these as similar or distinct.
- Such classifications cannot be made without a real practical context and a properly specified theory of interpretation.

*If the workshop participants agree on a context and a theory,
there can be a theoretically and practically fruitful discussion.*

ONLY IF *ditto*.

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