Trust and the Chain of Communication

Extended Abstract

There is a conflict between two intuitions in the debate on reference. On the one hand, as has been convincingly argued by Putnam (1973), Kripke (1981), and Kaplan (1989), speakers of a language seem to be able to refer to things which they do not themselves have discriminating information about. To paraphrase Kaplan (1989)'s description of semantic consumerism, one does not need to know where Samarkand is to communicate referentially about Samarkand. There are also good reasons for believing that one does not need to know any description which picks it out in order to refer to it. On the other hand, we do also have countervailing reasons to believe that referential communication does actually require us to have discriminating knowledge of referents to be successful. As Evans (1982) argues, to have a properly object-directed thought, one would need to have enough information to discriminate that object from other candidate referents. Hence, such thoughts can only be conveyed to hearers who are in a similar position to do so. And, more recently, Dahl (2025) has argued that to properly understand action-directing uses of referential expressions, one must have the ability to, in a sense, discriminate what the referential expression refers to (see Quine (1977) and Hawthorne and Manley (2012) for arguments to the contrary).

My aim in this talk is to reconcile, on the one hand, our ability to successfully communicate with referential terms whose reference we cannot independently discriminate with, on the other hand, the intuition that referential uptake requires us to know what is being referred to. I begin by considering the standard explanation of our ability to communicate referentially with terms which we do not have discriminating information for: an explanation in terms of the causal chain of communication linking a referent with a speakers' utterances of the referential term. This explanation, as Evans (1982) argues, is not sufficient for having information about the referent. As such, the mere fact that a term stands in such a relation to an object would not in itself provide any explanation of our ability to interpersonally co-ordinate actions by uttering the term. For it to do that, we would have to be aware of that causal connection so that we could use it to guide our search for the referent.

But this very point, I will argue, is what shows us how to solve the problem. What we need to be able to use borrowed terms to co-ordinate action is that the relevant discriminating knowledge is available to us. To some extent, this is already implicit in how we think about knowledge-who. As Farkas (2016) argues, we can be said to know what a phone number is even if we would have to look at the contact list in our phone to find the answer. Further, when we learn a new referential term from another speaker, we trust that they could successfully communicate referentially with it. If we did not, then we could not intend – as the proponents a causal chain of communication would have it – to use it to refer as they do. And that trust allows us to partly rely on them for

our ability to pick out what the term is referring to. It is trust, not causation, which makes up the links of the chain of communication.

The idea, then, is that we can offer a shared explanation of both intuitions. We can refer using borrowed vocabulary because we trust other speakers to be able to aid us in locating and discriminating the referent. And that we trust certain speakers to be able to aid us in identifying a referent is the discriminating information we need for both object-directed thought and to have our actions successfully targeted by the use of a referential expression. Further, this approach also answers a criticism levelled against the causal version of the chain of communication, originating in Sosa (1970) (Hawthorne and Manley, 2012, cf.), namely that it cannot explain reference by reverse causal chain. These are cases where, say, I order a ship to be built and named The Mary Sue. Several years later, without ever having been in causal contact with the ship, I can still refer to it by name. But whereas the connection goes in the wrong direction for the causal version of the chain of communication, an account where the links are made up by relations of trust can extend both forwards and backwards in time. I can trust that the agents sent out to construct and name the ship have acquired discriminating information they could provide me with to locate the ship.

References

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