SEMANTIC REFERENCE NOT BY CONVENTION? [1]

Jessica Pepp

Abstract
The aim of this paper is to approach a basic question in semantics: what is semantic reference? Or, what is reference, insofar as the notion has a role in the semantics of natural language? I highlight two ways of conceiving of semantic reference, which offer different starting points for answering the question. One of these conceptions – what I call the *conventional* conception of semantic reference – is the standard conception. I propose an alternative to this conception: what I call the *historical* conception of semantic reference. The first section of the paper explains the two conceptions, highlighting their common ground and how they differ. The second section offers a preliminary argument that the two conceptions are really both ways of conceiving of *semantic* reference, and that the historical conception is more viable as a basis for the semantics of natural language than the conventional conception. Finally, in the third section, I comment on the status of the historical conception as a basic view about semantic reference that sets the stage for (but does not constitute) the development of a *theory* of semantic reference.

1. Two conceptions of semantic reference

To present the two conceptions of semantic reference perspicuously, it will be useful, first, to lay out common ground between the two conceptions. This common ground involves many of the notions I will be relying upon, so discussion of it will serve to introduce these notions, as well. There are three points of agreement among the two conceptions that I would like to highlight.

First, proponents of both conceptions can agree that *utterances* of expressions have *historical explanations*. I mean this only in the very broad sense in which there is some kind of story to tell about what gives rise to a given event, such as an utterance.

Second, it should be agreed that *expressions* of language have *conventions of use*. For instance, it is a convention of English that "I" is used to refer to oneself. No one can reasonably dispute this.

The third thing that should be agreed upon is that, at least in many cases, the conventions of language will suggest what might be called "conventional referents". Here is how. Any convention must apply to something. It is outside the scope of this paper to discuss the theory of convention, but perhaps it is safe to say that a convention applies to a type of situation. For instance, if one is served a bowl of soup, it is conventional that one eat the soup with a spoon. If one is introduced to a new person, it is conventional to shake the new person's hand.[2] And so on. Conventions for using referring expressions must also fit this pattern: it must be possible to describe the type of situation in which it is conventional to use a given expression. For instance, one might describe the type of situation in which it is conventional to use "I" in the following way: if one intends to make oneself the subject of discourse, use "I". Or, if one stands in a certain kind of historical relation to oneself, use "I". Or, most simply, use "I" if you are referring to yourself.[3]

Given that conventions for referring apply to situations in which someone is referring to something, it is possible to abstract from them, at least in some cases (empty names might be an exception), the *conventional referent* of an expression (or of an occurrence of that expression). This is the individual that the speaker *would* be referring to *if* she were using the expression in accord with convention.

This much, I am assuming, is common ground. There are utterances, which have historical explanations, and there are linguistic expressions, which are associated with conventions. Because these conventions apply to situations in which speakers are referring to things, we can speak of the "conventional referents" of expressions as those things that the speaker would be referring to, if she were using the expression in accord with convention.

With these points as background, I will now characterize the two conceptions of semantic reference, noting the points on which they differ. On the conventional conception

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[2] Of course, such conventions vary by culture and geography.

[3] Note that this introduces the idea of non-conventional notion of referring, such that a convention for referring is a convention of using an expression to refer, in this non-conventional way, to a certain thing. This is central to the discussion in section 2, below.

of semantic reference, referring expressions in a language are associated with certain conventions, which determine their semantic referents, perhaps relative to a context of use.[4] The way I am using it here, "determine" means "make to be the case". So on the conventional conception, the convention associated with an expression, perhaps relative to a context, makes the expression's referent be its referent. This is in contrast with the use of "determine" on which it means "figure out", or "reveal". The conventional conception does not hold that a referring expression, as used in a given context, has a referent already, independent of the convention, which the convention in some way reveals. Rather, the convention makes the referent of the expression be what it is.

Now it is true that on the conventional conception, referring expressions have come to be associated with their conventions via the ongoing processes of language formation and change. But at any given time in the history of a language, there is a convention as to how any referring expression of that language refers. When a speaker uses a referring expression, the semantic referent of her use of the expression is determined by the convention, regardless of the history of that particular use of the expression. It is not that the conventional conception of reference ignores history. Conventions arise in linguistic communities over time, and thus have histories. But on the conventional conception, the history of the convention is pre-semantic. For instance, there is a history behind the convention governing my use of "I". However, when I use "I", the current convention that "I" is used to refer to oneself simply applies as it stands, and *determines* that this occurrence of "I" semantically refers to me, Jessica Pepp.

A third point is that the conventional conception holds that what makes an expression be a referring expression is the fact that there is a convention of using it to refer. What makes "I" a referring expression is that there is a convention associated with it whereby it is used to refer to whoever uses it.

Each of these points is in contrast to the historical conception of semantic reference. The basis for the historical conception is the relation between an utterance of a referring expression and that which gave rise to the utterance. Another way to put it is that on the

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[4] For instance, in David Kaplan's semantics for indexicals, linguistic convention supplies a "character" for the expression "I", which determines that the referent of "I" relative to a given context of use is the agent of that context; Kaplan (1989).

historical conception, the semantic referent of an expression as uttered on a given occasion is part of the historical explanation of how that expression came to be uttered.[5] To use a phrase due to Joseph Almog, an expression as used in a given utterance has a referent, x, because x is the "source of a chain" leading to the use of the expression in that utterance.[6] Thus, semantic reference itself is a historical relation between an expression as uttered and the referent of that uttered expression. The conventions associated with a referring expression do not determine – in the sense of "make to be" – its referent (relative to a context). They may help to determine – in the sense now of "reveal" or "figure out" – what the referent of the expression as uttered is. But they do not make it have a certain referent.

So one important difference between the two conceptions is that on the historical conception, referring expressions have semantic reference only relative to utterances. Indeed, what makes an expression be a semantically referring expression is not the existence of a convention of using it to refer, but the fact that a particular utterance of it has been generated in a certain way.

Before moving on, let me offer an analogy to make the historical conception more vivid. The historical conception views the relation of semantic reference as analogous with the ownership relation between an email address and its owner. Suppose that a company, Corputech, Inc., has a policy that each employee is to have an email address of the form firstname.lastname@corputech.com. When you receive an email from someone with the sender address: theodore.thomas@corputech.com, knowledge of the Corputech convention may lead you to guess that the owner of that email address is the Corputech employee named Theodore Thomas. But you will also be aware that this might not be the name of the employee who sent the order. There might have been an error in setting up the address, and the sender's name may actually be "Thomas Theodore," or "Theodora Thomas", or something completely different. There may be no Corputech employee at all by the name "Theodore Thomas". And even if there was no error, it is clear that the Corputech convention

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[5] I find this idea primarily in the work of Keith Donnellan on referential uses of definite descriptions (1966) and empty names (1974). Of course, neither of these phenomena is my subject in the present paper, but I think my notion of a historical conception of semantic reference is closely related to Donnellan's "historical explanation theory" of reference.

[6] Almog (2004: 404-405).

does not determine (in the sense of "make to be the case") that the address theo-dore.thomas@corputech.com is owned by the employee by that name. Rather, it was the work done by the information technology specialist in setting up the address that made it the case that this person has this address. Your knowledge of the Corputech email assignment convention is something that can help you figure out who the sender is, but the convention itself does not *make* the referent be what it is. The convention is a guide, not a determiner.

Just as the owner of an email address is part of the historical explanation of how that email address was set up, so, on the historical conception, the semantic referent of an expression is part of the historical explanation of how that expression came to be used.

It should be noted that the historical conception of semantic reference does not and should not deny that language users exploit conventions of language to aid in communication, or even that such exploitation of conventions is required for large portions of our communication. The historical conception only denies that conventions of language are determinative of semantic reference; that what it is for an expression to semantically refer to something is for it to refer to it by convention.

To sum up: the two conceptions of semantic reference agree that there are expressions, conventions associated with expressions, utterances of expressions, and historical explanations of utterances. They differ in that the conventional conception takes expressions to have semantic referents determined by conventions associated with those expressions, regardless of the historical explanations of particular utterances; whereas the historical conception takes expressions to have semantic referents only relative to utterances of those expressions, where the semantic referents are part of the historical explanations of those utterances.

2. Non-conventionality of semantic reference

The historical conception of semantic reference may seem like a category error. Utterances are speech acts, one might say; things we do with a language that already, independently, has its semantics. In making utterances we may capitalize on the semantic interpretation of a language or we may flout it, but that is irrelevant to what the semantic interpretation of

the language is. Expressions of a language mean what they mean – and have the semantic referents they have – as provided for by the conventions of the language, independent of what any speaker may have in mind, and independent of what led to a speaker's use of an expression on a given occasion.[7] Thus, when understood correctly, the historical and conventional conceptions are compatible: it is just that they are not both conceptions of *semantic* reference. The historical conception is of some other, non-semantical relation.

This line of thinking can be challenged by reflecting on how referring conventions might arise in natural language. One view of how referring conventions might arise is suggested by Saul Kripke's influential account of name reference. On Kripke's view, a name refers to something in virtue of a convention having been passed along a "chain of communication", from user to user.[8] When I use a name, it refers to something in virtue of my having taken on a convention of using it to refer to that thing - the convention passed to me by the person from who I acquired the name. This convention may have been instituted originally by what Kripke calls a "baptism": an event in which someone fixes the referent of an expression by stipulating that it will refer to a particular thing. According to Kripke, this is whatever fits the description used by the baptizer. For instance, in Kripke's famous example, Leverrier introduces "Neptune" as a name for whatever satisfies the description, "the cause of the perturbations in the orbit of Uranus".[9]

But whether a given thing satisfies this description depends on what, for instance, "Uranus" refers to. Presumably, a view like Kripke's will say that the reference of "Uranus" in Leverrier's description is similarly determined by the convention taken on by Leverrier when he acquired the name "Uranus". And that convention will have similarly been instituted by some description-involving baptism (or reference-fixing), the satisfier of which

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[7] See, for example, Kripke's (1977: 263) critique of Donnellan (1966), in which Kripke operates on the assumption that the notion of reference relevant to semantics is a matter of the conventions of the language.

[8] It might seem that Kripke conceives of reference historically in the way I have described. However, I think it is clear from his discussion that the historical relation in Kripke's account of reference is between a speaker's acquisition of a name and the initial introduction of a convention of using the name to refer to a given thing (the "baptism"). The reference relation itself is a conventional one, given by the convention introduced. The historical relation in the account is between the expression and its associated convention, not between the expression and its referent.

[9] Kripke (1980: 79, footnote 33).

will depend on what some other expressions refer to, which will depend on some other description-involving introduction, and so on.

To stop this regress, reference-fixing descriptions must ultimately be grounded in expressions whose reference had not been fixed by a description, but in some other way. Or, the Kripkean "baptismal" story might be disregarded at the outset, and one could argue that referring conventions are established without such reference-fixing events. On either approach, there is appeal to what might be called a "brute convention." No reference-fixing descriptions or baptisms are involved: a convention of using some name *N* to refer to some individual *x* just arises. This convention can then be passed from speaker to speaker as they acquire the expression from one another. Having acquired *N* and entered into this conventional practice of using it to refer to *x,* when one now uses *N,* the convention determines that the use of *N* refers to *x.*

But consider what it is for a convention of using *N* to refer to *x* to "just arise". In a stipulative reference-fixing event like a Kripkean baptism, the baptizer *mentions* the expression and stipulates that it will refer to whatever fits a certain description. With this convention established, subsequent *uses* of the expression would refer to that thing. However, if a convention arises simply because speakers *use N* to refer to *x,* then these pre-conventional uses of *N* are just that: *uses* of *N,* not *mentions* of *N.* As uses, they must be interpreted. Suppose someone is struck by the strangeness of another person she sees, and declares, "Garsaloosius walks among us," making up the name "Garsaloosius" because it seems to suit the strange appearance of that other person. This is an introduction of the expression "Garsaloosius", but it is also a use of the expression. "Garsaloosius" is not introduced as an uninterpreted sign, which will become interpreted if a convention arises of using it to refer to the strange looking person. Indeed, the idea that a convention for referring could arise just by virtue of people using the expression to refer to something depends on the pre-conventional uses being of an interpreted expression - an expression that refers. If the initial uses of the name were uninterpreted, they would not provide the basis for the development of a convention for using "Garsaloosius" to refer to something.[10]

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[10] Note that in the present discussion, I am mentioning - not using - the expression "Garsaloosius".

It is commonplace to note that the project of semantics for natural languages deals with *interpreted* languages. The aim is to understand the interpretation of a language, not to specify it. Thus, in characterizing semantic reference, one should not ignore the fact that referential expressions, if they are used, are interpreted, regardless of whether any convention is associated with them. This suggests that convention cannot be the foundation of semantic reference. The historical conception of semantic reference that I have outlined seems a better account of the nature of semantic reference.

There are responses to be made on behalf of the conventional conception of semantic reference. I will briefly consider two. I do not have definitive replies to them, but I will explain why I do not think either will work. First, one might respond by insisting that pre-conventional uses of an expression (for instance, the initial use of "Garsaloosius" in my example) are not uses of interpreted expressions. They are speech acts which allow the *speaker* to be interpreted (i.e., we can say what *she* refers to, but not what her expression refers to). The expression used only comes to be interpreted once a convention for using it to refer in this way arises.

I do not think this response works because "Garsaloosius" is a linguistic expression (it is not, for instance, an inarticulate grunt), and it is *used* in the example I gave. In the example, the expression is introduced by being used. This was crucial for avoiding the regress problem associated with introductions by reference-fixing stipulation. A linguistic expression cannot be used (as opposed to mentioned) without being interpreted. And the business of natural language semantics is to understand the interpretation of natural language. Thus, it seems to me that "Garsaloosius" in its initial use has semantic reference if anything does.

Another response on behalf of the conventionalist would be to accept that there is historical semantic reference in initial cases, but that once a convention arises it replaces the historical relationship as the semantic relationship. Thus, in the initial use of "Garsaloosius", the semantic referent might be whatever plays the appropriate role in the historical explanation of the use. However, once the convention has arisen, the semantic referent of the expression is what the convention determines.

This introduces an odd disunity in the nature of semantic reference, however. In pre-conventional uses, an expression has as its semantic referent something figuring in the historical explanation of its use. Later on, once a convention is associated with the expression, its semantic referent is determined by that convention, even though there are still historical explanations of uses of the expression. It is not that this is an impossible view to hold, but it does strike me as *ad hoc*, designed to make semantic reference as much as possible a conventional relation, with exceptions for the cases where this does not seem plausible.

3. Status of the historical conception

I think these considerations tell against a conventional conception of semantic reference. This does not mean that there are no worries for the historical conception. Obviously, much is left to be articulated about this conception. I have not given an account of precisely what kind of historical relation reference is. If the task of developing the historical conception of semantic reference is thought of as providing a guide to finding referents for what Donnellan called an "omniscient observer of history" (hereafter, "OOH"), then the guide I have offered might seem hopelessly vague. All it says is that the OOH should pick out something that is in some way historically related to the utterance. I have not said in what way. So how has any account of reference been provided? It is not open to me to reply that *I* may not know what constitutes reference, but the OOH does. That would make the account of reference uninteresting, because we would be saying that reference is just whatever relation a being who knows everything would say it is.

But I do not think the prospects for the historical conception of semantic reference are so bleak. The situation can be viewed as analogous with the case of seeing. In times before vision science, people probably believed that seeing was a historical relation seers had to the things they saw. That is, they probably believed that the things they saw in some way gave rise to their seeing them. They probably did *not* believe that seeing involved having one's experience just happen to match up in some way or other to the thing seen.

Of course, prior to vision science, the nature of the historical relation between seers and things seen was unknown. Similarly, the nature of the historical relation between an expression and its referent needs more investigation. But just as the starting point of the

investigation of the relation of seeing was the basic view of it as a historical relation, so a starting point for the investigation of the relation of reference is the basic view of *it* as a historical relation. The historical conception of semantic reference is not so obviously correct as is the historical conception of seeing, but it is a view at the same - basic - level. The difficulties of working out a historical *theory* of reference do not invalidate the historical *conception* of reference.

Jessica Pepp

University of California, Los Angeles

pepp@humnet.ucla.edu

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