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The expression ‘referential communication’ has become a term of art in linguistics / sociology of language, in animal communication studies and in philosophy. The usages only roughly agree. The common core is something like this: in referential communication one gives information about the world, or at least that is its typical feature. In linguistics, or the sociology of language, it is contrasted with so called interpersonal communication, geared to playing with or reinforcing the relation between the communicators rather than to the subject matter of the discourse (like teasing, chatting etc). In animal communication studies it is contrasted with affective communication, which primarily influences the states of emotion and will of the receivers. In the recent philosophical tradition, where Gareth Evans’s work is central (and, as far as I know, is the place where the term is introduced into philosophy), the contrasts do not correspond in scope. In this tradition, the typical feature of referential communication is that it involves reference, or purported reference, to objects, effected by means of singular terms. Referential communication, in this sense, is communication by means of referring acts.

Matthias Paul’s recent book belongs squarely in the philosophical tradition. Its purpose is to give an account of the *success conditions* of referential communication, or, more precisely, of the success conditions insofar as the object-reference itself is concerned. That is, for utterances of sentences like

- (1) You have lost your bag
- (2) Troy was discovered by Schliemann

to use two of Paul’s own examples, the study is concerned with the conditions under which speaker and audience manage to understand the reference in question (of ‘you’, ‘Troy’, ‘Schliemann’) in a sufficiently similar way for the communicative transaction to be counted successful.

The intuitive idea of success in this respect is that speaker and audience have the same thing “in mind”, or again that there is “sameness in mental reference”. The speaker initially has some object in mind, and by means a verbal utterance he tries to reproduce this representation, or mental reference, in the mind of the audience. This intuitive idea leaves several hard issues undecided, like whether it is enough that speaker and audience think of the same object or beyond that must think about it in similar ways. Still, the idea is important in two respects. First, it is strategically crucial, since it assigns primary importance to considerations about mental content. The alternative, more in the line of Michael Dummett and (but to a lesser extent) Donald Davidson, would be to account for communicative success in terms of linguistic understanding. The theory of linguistic understanding would itself belong together with a semantic theory of natural language. Issues about thought content would be addressed only after this theory is in place. Starting out from thought content, as Paul does, could be a way of reversing the order of explanation, an option taken by philosophers such as Jerry Fodor and Stephen Schiffer. Paul does not take this step, since it is not part of his investigation to give an account of linguistic reference itself. Rather, he assumes the notion of linguistic reference (in the sense of “conventional” reference of utterance types) and limits the discussion to communication by means of

referential linguistic devices.

The second important point is that when one starts out from thought content in accounting for communicative success this notion runs the risk of coming apart from that of linguistic understanding. That this can happen on any account is obvious from demonstrative examples such as

(3) That is a vixen

where the audience can understand the sentence meaning without understanding the thought expressed (since not getting the demonstrative reference right). But if success is measured by the extent to which the speaker manages to get across what or whom he has in mind, this phenomenon may become more widespread. For instance, in one of Paul's examples John says to Mary after a party

(4) This guy with the red shirt and the purple glasses was really amazing.

Mary doesn't know who that is, not even after the added description "That friend of Frank who plays in his jazz band". By Paul's standards, Mary hasn't understood the referring act and communication has failed (p 4). An intuition to the contrary is that communication works fine, since Mary perfectly understands what John is saying (in this example, the expressions 'this guy ...' and 'that friend ..' are supposedly not used demonstratively). She only lacks the experience of having seen the guy herself. I am not claiming that Paul is wrong here, only that the discrepancy arises and tends to arise from such a starting point.

As is to some extent illustrated by this example, the enterprise of providing an account of communicative success is not initially well defined. Our pre-theoretic standards are messy, perhaps conflicting, and leave many cases undecided. We have rough and ready intuitions about success (like that someone does what he is told) and strong intuitions about clear cases of failure (two persons believe they are talking about the same country, while actually one is talking about Switzerland and the other about Sweden), but in many cases we just don't know what to say. This raises the question of the adequacy conditions of the account itself. Paul discusses this in a section on methodology, where he first expresses a balanced view about the status of intuitions: they do have a weight, but cannot simply be taken as raw empirical data for the theory. His conclusion, however, is that the account must accord with our intuitions as long as these intuitions themselves agree with "other well-motivated considerations" (p xxiv). Having said that, he goes on to treat some intuitions about a selected few examples as litmus tests for accounts of referential communication. This is remarkable, since the examples in question are not of the aforementioned clear and uncontroversial kind, but crucial cases where intuitions might go in different directions.

In one type of case I think this leads him astray. This happens when he is arguing for the possibility of communicative success *without* reference. Paul relies on examples like (2) and

(5) Sherlock Holmes always solves all his cases

(pp 95-97), claiming that it is quite possible – and indeed that this seems obvious – to understand such utterances despite the fact that 'Sherlock Holmes' doesn't refer and 'Troy' might not either. This intuition is proclaimed to provide an adequacy condition for theories of referential communication. I find this move rash, since there is no attempt to check whether the

intuition of success in such cases fits the selected notion and kind of referential communication. Maybe the intuitions rely on tacit assumptions that fail to agree with intended classification.

This suspicion is all the more pressing since Paul has restricted his account to a particular kind of referential communication, that which he calls “grounded”. A grounded referring act is one in which the speaker “intends to invoke a grounded idea” (p 47), and a grounded idea is one that is “taken to be grounded in an object” (p 41, 42), which includes the condition that “it is assumed that some sort of contact(s) has been made with its referent”. The notion of a grounded idea is contrasted with that of an “aiming idea”, which is taken to be “aiming at an object” (p 42), usually by being associated with some reference-fixing condition. Correspondingly Paul speaks of aiming referring acts, i.e. acts where the speaker “intends to invoke a certain aiming idea” (p 47). This distinction between aiming and grounded is supposed to parallel Donnellan’s distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions. In referring to whoever murdered Smith by means of the description “Smith’s murderer” I use it attributively, by Donnellan’s distinction, and Paul adds that in so doing I invoke an aiming idea.

As is exemplified below, this distinction between aiming and grounded ideas is not entirely clear. There is also a question of how Paul’s intuitions fit in with it. First, I find it hard to understand how one can take (5) as an example involving a grounded referential act, since no normally informed speaker would take the term ‘Sherlock Holmes’ to have a referent or correspond to a particular object the speaker’s idea is *of*. Example (2) is different, since it is supposed to come with a belief that the name has a referent, which classifies the act and the idea as grounded. However, the intuition about successful communication *might* depend on the assumption that we understand each other simply because we associate the same descriptive (reference fixing) condition with the name “Troy”. We both mean, say, whichever city the Greeks besieged for ten years and finally entered by hiding in a wooden horse. If that is so, we should be held to perform aiming acts rather than grounded acts with (2). If the act is aiming, then, even if the intuition that we can communicate successfully with (2) is correct, it is not an intuition that provides an adequacy condition for an account of grounded referential communication. There is a gap here between the intuition and the concepts invoked in the theory, showing that the general relation between intuition and theory requires a more thorough discussion.

Paul takes intuitions concerning sentences such as (2) and (5) to show that accounts like that of Gareth Evans are mistaken. On Evans’s account, presented in *Varieties of Reference* (1982), genuinely referential, “information-invoking” communication requires a referent for being successful. Such referring acts are “object-dependent” in this sense. Beside genuinely referential communication Evans also acknowledged “quasi referential communication”, which is made in the make-believe or pretense mode, and which doesn’t require a referent. For such talk, which is a different kind of communication, different success conditions hold. Paul, by contrast, takes use of (2) and (5) to make out genuine, grounded referential communication. Still he thinks that the success conditions should be different in cases where there is a referent from cases where there is none. If there is no referent it should be necessary and sufficient that the speaker’s and the hearer’s respective ideas are related to the same practice of object-pretence (p 163), i.e. the same legends, stories, books, films etc (and that speaker and hearer satisfy the action-based condition mentioned below). This account is more or less Evans’s account of non-genuine referential communication (although not mentioned by Paul, it also has been proposed and elaborated by Tyler Burge in ‘Russell’s problem and intentional identity’). Thus, on Paul’s view, there is just one kind of talk, but two different accounts of success. Evans’s requirement that the account

of genuine referential communication should be uniform is dismissed for the reason that a uniform account cannot be descriptively adequate (p 132), and the reason for this, again, is the intuitions concerning examples such as (2) and (5).

What about the cases where there is a referent? Paul reviews and rejects a number of earlier accounts. According to the simple object-dependent account it is necessary and sufficient that speaker and hearer refer to the same object (i.e. have ideas with mental reference to the same object). Paul takes this account to be refuted by some Frege-like counterexamples, including that of Hesperus-Phosphorus: two speakers misunderstand each other because of associating different modes of presentation with the name 'Hesperus', even though referring to the same object.

According to the pure Fregean account, a hearer understands a referential use of a term *t* if and only if he associates the same modes of presentation with *t* as the speaker. If mode of presentation would be something like associated predicates and descriptions, then, according to Paul, two persons can associate the same mode of presentation with a term ("being a rock", "being green", "being located approximately 50 meter after the first path mark" etc, – p 110) and still be talking about different objects. In that case communication would fail, and so sameness of mode of presentation would not be sufficient. Still, it would not do either to adhere to Frege's own idea that sense, and hence mode of presentation, determines reference, for that is not necessary: speakers can well associate different, at least slightly different, modes of presentation with a term and yet understand each other (p 107).

One way out of this would be to require *both* that speaker and hearer think of the same object and that they think about in the same or similar ways. This is the line taken by Evans and by François Recanati in *Direct Reference. From Language to Thought* (1993). It is also the line ultimately chosen by Paul himself. The question is what kind of sameness or similarity one should require. Paul argues that Evans's version is too weak. Evans requires only that the hearer thinks of the referent as e.g. the bearer of the name 'Hesperus', or as what is demonstrated by the speaker with his use of 'she' and thus a salient female person or creature. Paul takes that to be refuted by certain Fregean like counterexamples, for instance one where what speaker and hearer each associates with the speaker's utterance of 'he' only by mere coincidence is the same man.

Recanati's success conditions, on the other hand, are taken to be too strong. Recanati requires that the hearer associates with the singular term that mode of presentation which the speaker intends to communicate. Paul comments (pp 157-58), first, that one cannot in general assume that there is any particular mode of presentation intended to be conveyed by the speaker, and, secondly, that even when there is such an intended mode of presentation, it is too strong a requirement that the hearer think of the object under exactly that mode. This objection again is based on an intuition. Suppose the speaker says

(6) Hesperus is very bright

and the hearer mishears, coming to think of the object under the mode of presentation *being the planet called 'Hesperus'*. Paul thinks that the communication is successful even though the speaker may have wanted the hearer to think of the object as one called 'Hesperus'. He concludes that we need a weaker condition of similarity.

Paul's own solution to this problem is what he calls an "action-based" success condition. Under that condition the following similarity should hold: "the hearer has to entertain a mode of

presentation which provides the basis for coordinating actions with the speaker” ( p 161). As an example of the relevant coordination failure Paul offers the following: if the speaker has a *morning star* mode of presentation of Venus and the hearer has an *evening star* mode of presentation, then they will evaluate (6) in different ways, since the one will monitor the brightness of the planet in the morning and the other in the evening.

This is an interesting suggestion, and it is a pity that Paul doesn't more than sketch the idea in 3-4 pages. For instance, we would like to know what action coordination amounts to. If it is exemplified by such events as realizing an appointment (speaker and hearer later show up at the same place at the same time), then the proposal seems mistaken, for it will depend on background beliefs whether coordination is best served by successful or by unsuccessful communication. To give a simple example, suppose Rock mistranslates Pierre's French word 'ouest' into English as 'east', where the correct alternative is 'west'. Pierre and Rock agree to meet outside the station building, in front of what Pierre calls 'l'entrée oueste', translated by Rock as 'the eastern entrance'. At the station Rock goes to the eastern entrance, where he happily meets with Pierre, since Pierre has mistaken it for the western entrance. Only at a later occasion is the systematic mistranslation of the word detected, and then the earlier communication failure can be inferred. But if the first exchange is judged by coordination criteria solely on its own merits, it incorrectly passes as successful. It might be that action coordination is good criterion for *overall* success of communication, but it seems not to work as applied to the single communicative event.

Still, the proposal is interesting and worthy of further investigation, and that is not the only virtue of the book. It is throughout clearly written and well structured. Paul takes over good ideas and arguments from others, such as Evans, but at many times also brings forward good original considerations. For instance, he has a clear and definitive refutation of what he calls Evans's "argument from understanding". At several places he exercises good judgement in case of basic conceptual issues. I think Paul is entirely right in wanting to keep the issue of conditions of communicative success separate from issues about the reliability, or rationality of communication (p 64). It is true that communicative devices would be useless if their use would not be regularly successful, but that is not something that should be built into the very definition of success. Sometimes it seems that we do succeed by luck. Paul also takes an exemplary stand on the issue of Meinongian objects.

Paul's overly uncritical reliance on example intuitions is one of the drawbacks. His elaborations about the nature of mental representations (chapter 2) strike me as too speculative, overladen and, as far as I can see, not ultimately needed for deciding the central issues. His two-part account, with different success conditions depending on whether or not there is a referent, probably creates more difficulties for mental content than it would solve for communication (after all, it is quite analogous to old problems about "intentional objects", which on theories such as the early Husserl's were external to the act content in case an external object existed, and internal to the act content otherwise). A final complaint concerns proof-reading: too many passages contain a word too much or too little, not to speak of letters.

Nevertheless, the balanced judgment must be that this on the whole is an excellent book, not to be passed over by anyone seriously interested in the issue of communicative success.