Reference as a Speech Act

Peter Hanks
University of Minnesota
pwhanks@umn.edu

1. Introduction

Discussions of reference in philosophy and linguistics are often framed as investigations into a semantic relation between linguistic forms and things. Proper names, pronouns, indexicals (e.g. 'I' or 'today'), demonstratives (e.g. 'this' and 'that'), and (perhaps) definite descriptions all refer, in some of their instances and often only in context, to objects. Let's call this kind of reference *linguistic reference*. There is, however, a more fundamental relation of reference that holds between *people* and objects. People refer to things, and their doing so makes it possible for expressions to refer. Linguistic expressions, after all, are just collections of sounds or marks, with no intrinsic ability to stand for anything else. It is because of the way people use these sounds and marks that they come to refer to things outside themselves.

To refer in this more basic sense is to *do* something – it is to perform an action. Reference in this sense is a kind of action. Familiar examples of this kind of action occur in speech, when someone utters a word or phrase and thereby refers to something. There are also non-verbal examples involving pointing, grasping, touching, and other gestures. Acts of reference also occur (arguably) when someone has a thought or perceptual experience that is directed at a particular individual. It may be that such reference is more basic than reference in speech and other behavior, in which case a full account of reference would lead ultimately to the philosophy of mind and psychology.[1] In this brief essay, however, I will only be concerned with reference as a spoken act, i.e. acts of reference in which a speaker refers to something through the use of a linguistic expression. Let's call this *speech act reference*. I will attempt to do two things. The first will involve a closer examination of the priority of speech act reference over linguistic reference. As we will see, this claim of priority can be challenged, and meeting this challenge leads to a more nuanced view of the relationship between spoken acts of reference and linguistic reference. The second will be to argue that spoken acts of reference are possible only as components of illocutionary acts with satisfaction conditions, such as assertions, questions, orders, and promises. This rules out free-standing acts of reference. It also draws a conceptual connection between spoken acts of reference and satisfaction conditions. The speech act of reference is always an element in a larger speech act with truth-conditions, or answerhood conditions, or fulfillment conditions. To refer to something in speech is to make a certain sort of contribution to these sorts of satisfaction conditions. This entails that it is possible to use a referring expression without thereby performing a speech act of reference, and, conversely, that it is possible to refer to something in speech without uttering a linguistic expression that refers to that thing. Examples of both will be provided below.

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[1] See, for example, (Searle 1983) and (Campbell 2002).

2. Acts of reference and linguistic reference

Linguistic reference, as I have been using the term, is a relation that holds between a linguistic expression, the object to which it refers, and, in many cases, a context of utterance. The name 'Barack Obama' refers to Barack Obama. The occurrence of the word 'I', in my utterance of 'I am cold', refers to me. I claimed above that this relation of linguistic reference is based on the explanatorily prior fact that people use expressions to refer to things. In a simple and naïve formulation, an expression E refers to x because people use E to refer to x.

But it could be argued that the order of priority is in fact the reverse — that linguistic reference should be used to explain speech act reference. In the introduction to a recent volume on reference Andrea Bianchi writes:

> But it is almost indisputable … that a crucial role is played by the fact that (some of) the linguistic expressions we use have *semantic properties* that connect them to extra-linguistic entities. Thanks to these properties, they may be used by us to *refer* to things. (Bianchi 2015, p.1)

In other words, it is *because* of the fact that a linguistic expression refers to a certain entity that people refer to that entity by using that expression. A natural way of putting this is to say that referring expressions exert a kind of control over the acts people perform by using them. They control not only the kind of linguistic act a speaker performs but also the content of that act. A speaker performs an act of reference using the name 'Barack Obama', as opposed to an act of predication, or quantification, or something else, because this name is a referring expression. Furthermore, she refers to Barack Obama, and not, say, Hillary Clinton, or the city of Chicago, because the name 'Barack Obama' refers to Barack Obama. Or consider John Perry's example of Heimson, who is confused and thinks he is David Hume (Perry 1977). Heimson says 'I am David Hume', believing his use of 'I' to refer to David Hume. But he is wrong. The meaning of 'I' controls who Heimson refers to.[2]

We are already in a bit of a quandary here. On the one hand, there is a strong intuition behind the idea that the semantic relation of reference between linguistic expressions and things must be based on prior facts about spoken acts of reference. Something has to explain how an expression comes to refer to what it does. It can't be magic. The only plausible place to look for such an explanation is in the uses that people make of words. On the other hand, the semantic properties of the referring expression a speaker uses seem to control both the fact that the speaker performed an act of reference and, in many cases, the identity of the object to which the speaker referred. That makes

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[2] This example works because 'I' is a 'pure' or 'automatic' indexical, i.e. a context sensitive expression whose meaning is sufficient for determining its semantic value in a context. Other kinds of non-automatic context sensitive referring devices, e.g. 'that' and 'this', require supplementation in order to secure a referent, such as a demonstration, or referential intention on the part of the speaker (see King 2014a, 2014b for discussion). In these cases the meaning of the referring expression does not have full control over the referent of an act of reference, although it still controls the fact that it is an act of reference and not some other kind of linguistic act.

the semantic properties of referring expressions explanatorily prior to the speech act of reference. This has us going around in a circle, with speech act reference explaining linguistic reference and vice versa.

We can break the circle by invoking a distinction, within speech acts of reference, between *semantic* reference and *speaker* reference. The distinction is best illustrated with Kripke's Jones-Smith example:

> Two people see Smith in the distance and mistake him for Jones. They have a brief colloquy: "What is Jones doing?" "Raking the leaves". "Jones," in the common language of both, is a name of Jones; it *never* names Smith. Yet, in some sense, on this occasion, clearly both participants in the dialogue have referred to Smith, and the second participant has said something true about the man he referred to if and only if Smith was raking the leaves (whether or not Jones was). (Kripke 1977, p. 111)

When the second participant says 'Jones is raking leaves', the *semantic* referent of his use of 'Jones' is Jones and the *speaker* referent is Smith. Put another way, he *semantically* refers to Jones but *speaker* refers to Smith. Now, it should be clear that linguistic reference controls the speech act of reference only for semantic reference. When the man says 'Jones is raking leaves' he semantically refers to Jones, and does so because the name 'Jones' refers to Jones and not Smith. And the speaker refers to Smith, even though Smith bears no semantic relation to the name 'Jones'.

With this distinction in hand we can now say that facts about speaker reference ground and explain linguistic reference; and facts about linguistic reference ground and explain semantic reference. Linguistic expressions refer to things, perhaps relative to contexts, because people have used those expressions to speaker refer to things in contexts. And once expressions refer to things it is possible for speakers to perform acts of semantic reference. The (grossly oversimplified) picture that emerges is one on which, prior to the existence of semantic relations between linguistic expressions and objects (in linguistic pre-history, as it were), there were acts of speaker reference in which speakers used sounds and marks to refer to things. These acts of speaker reference became conventionalized, eventually solidifying into the semantic properties of referring expressions. With those semantic properties in place, linguistic expressions took on the ability to control the acts of semantic reference performed by speakers. Summing up, first came acts of speaker reference, then linguistic reference, and then acts of semantic reference.

The picture is pleasingly simple and intuitive, but in fact it is a distortion. It obscures the fact that the speech act of reference, whether semantic reference or speaker reference, depends on a set of background practices and norms involving both referring expressions and acts of reference. Linguistic reference, semantic reference, and speaker reference are all tied up with one another in a complex, interdependent system. Kripke's own account of speaker reference helps make the point. He says that "we may tentatively define the speaker's referent of a designator to be that object which the speaker wishes to talk about, on a given occasion, and *believes fulfills the conditions for being the semantic referent of the designator*," (Kripke 1977, p. 111, my emphasis). This defines the notion of speaker reference partly in terms of the notion of semantic reference. If Kripke is right, and the concept of semantic reference figures crucially in the definition of speaker

reference, then it cannot be that speaker reference is somehow prior to semantic reference.

Here's another way to draw out the difficulty for the simple, intuitive picture. The picture asks us to imagine a time when linguistic reference did not exist, yet people referred to things with sounds or marks that were not (yet) referring expressions. Now, it's not hard to imagine someone pointing at or touching something while making a sound, but in that case the referential work is done behaviorally, not via the utterance of the sound. Nor is it hard to imagine someone referring to something with a previously meaningless noise or symbol, as long as this is set against a background of established practice of using names and other linguistic expressions to refer to things. What's hard to imagine, I submit, is a case in which someone refers to something *just* by uttering a meaningless sound, in the absence of any general practice of using sounds to refer to things.

An analogy might be helpful here. Consider the rook in chess.[3] There are *pieces* in chess that are rooks, and there are *moves* in chess games that are moves of the rook. Armed with this distinction we can ask: which came first, rooks or rook-moves? That's like asking: which came first, referring expressions or acts of speaker reference? The analogy with chess is useful because the answer is obvious. The game of chess came first, and it brought both rooks and rook-moves with it. Similarly, in the case of reference, the answer is that the set of practices and norms that constitute the general phenomenon of reference in language came first, and it brought linguistic reference, semantic reference, and speaker reference along with it.

The lesson is that there is no simple linear explanatory relationship between acts of speaker reference and relations of linguistic reference. Acts of reference and referring expressions are elements in a complex and holistic phenomenon, with each element allowing for and reinforcing the others. It may be that this phenomenon as a whole is founded on more basic acts of behavioral, cognitive, or experiential reference, but it is a mistake to think that one strand in this web can be pulled out and made the basis for the others.

3. Acts of reference and illocutionary acts

To this point we have been examining the relationship between the speech act of reference and linguistic reference. Let's now focus on the nature of the speech act itself, and in particular on the act of speaker reference.[4] What is it for someone to speaker refer to something? As a start, we might say that it is an action the speaker performs, using a linguistic expression, where the speaker has some particular individual in mind, intends

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[3] The analogy with chess is, of course, an allusion to Wittgenstein's use of language-games to investigate meaning and understanding, (Wittgenstein 1953).

[4] The act of semantic reference, based as it is on linguistic reference, is relatively unproblematic: for someone to semantically refer to an object x is for her to competently use an expression that refers to x. That said, the main conclusion of this section also applies to acts of semantic reference. Acts of semantic reference only occur as components of more comprehensive illocutionary acts with satisfaction conditions.

to single out or identify that individual, and, following Kripke, believes that the individual is the semantic referent of the referring expression she uses.

This seems right as far as it goes — the problem is that it is not very informative. What is it to have a particular individual in mind? And what goes into intending to single out or identify an individual? These concepts are no less philosophically problematic and mysterious than the concept of reference.

Progress is possible once we realize that acts of reference are possible only as elements of complete illocutionary acts with satisfaction conditions, such as assertions, questions, commands, or promises.[5] This claim is the analog, for speech acts, of Frege's Context Principle: "never ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition," (Frege 1980, Introduction, p.x). Another way to put this is that linguistic expressions are meaningful only insofar as they make contributions to the meanings of sentences in which they occur.[6] This is a claim about linguistic expressions, but a close analog applies to speech acts. Acts of reference, predication, quantification, etc. are the analogs of words, and whole illocutionary acts are the analogs of sentences. For acts of reference, then, the principle says: never ask about an act of reference in isolation, but only in the context of an illocutionary act. Equivalently: acts of reference are possible only as they make contributions to complete illocutionary acts.

Let's put reference aside for a moment and consider the act of predication. In the simplest sort of case an act of predication is an act of applying or attributing a property to an object. If I hold up a lime and say 'This is green', I predicate the property of being green of the lime. Now, it's fairly easy to see that an act of predication cannot occur in isolation. It makes no sense to *just* predicate, without an accompanying act of reference, or something else that serves to identify an object. You can't perform an act of predication by just saying 'green', or 'is green'. There has to be something else in the conversation that provides an object to be the target of your use of 'green'. Maybe you pointed to something, or you're answering a question about a previously identified object, or there is some salient object in the conversation. Note that in all of these cases you are *asserting* that something is green, and to assert something is to perform an illocutionary act. The speech act of predication cannot occur except as part of an assertion, or some other complete illocutionary act.[7]

The same goes for acts of reference. Acts of reference occur as components in acts of making assertions, asking questions, giving orders, making promises, and other illocutionary acts with satisfaction conditions. I can imagine a philosopher trying to

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[5] The concept of an illocutionary act was introduced by (Austin 1975) in his pioneering work on speech act theory. The concept was refined and systematized by Searle in (Searle 1969, 1979).

[6] Wittgenstein's version of the Context Principle in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* captures this clearly: "Only the proposition has sense; only in the context of a proposition has a name meaning, (3.3)" (Wittgenstein 1922, p.51).

[7] See (Hanks 2015) for more on the act of predication.

refute this by staring at something and saying 'that', or by just uttering someone's name.[8] But that's something only a philosopher would do. In ordinary conversation we never *just* refer to something. We always do so as part of a broader speech act.

The restriction to illocutionary acts *with satisfaction conditions* is important, and potentially controversial, because it rules out certain speech acts that may be thought to involve acts of reference. Suppose Alice is on the other side of a crowded room and I'm trying to get her attention. I call out 'Alice!'. This is a speech act, i.e. an act of trying to get someone's attention, but it does not have satisfaction conditions. It has *success* conditions, but not satisfaction conditions. I may or may not succeed in getting Alice's attention, but it doesn't make sense to say that this act is true or false, or answered or unanswered, or fulfilled or unfulfilled in the way that an order or promise can be fulfilled. All speech acts have success conditions, i.e. conditions for their successful performance, but only some have satisfaction conditions. Here's another example. Suppose Andy has just entered the room, and I say 'Hello Andy'. This is a greeting. My act is successful if Andy hears me and recognizes that I am greeting him. But it doesn't make sense to evaluate my act as true or false, or answered or unanswered, or fulfilled or unfulfilled.

One more example, from the TV show *Seinfeld*. A recurring trope on the show would have Jerry caught up in some mishap due to his nemesis Newman. Whenever that happened Jerry would scowl and say, with consternation and annoyance, '*Newman*'. The speech acts Jerry was performing in these cases were expressives, i.e. acts of expressing emotional or psychological states (see Searle 1979, ch. 1). Other examples of expressives are utterances of 'Thank you', or 'Sorry' — acts in which someone gives voice to a feeling of gratitude, or remorse, or some other mental state. In Jerry's case, he was expressing feelings of anger or frustration about something Newman did. Now, an expressive can be successful or unsuccessful, depending on whether the speaker really has the underlying psychological state and succeeds in making it manifest. But, again, it doesn't make sense to say that Jerry's acts of saying '*Newman*' are satisfied or not.

The claim that acts of reference are always components of illocutionary acts with satisfaction conditions implies that saying 'Alice!' to get her attention, or 'Hello Andy', or '*Newman*', are *not* acts of *reference* to Alice, Andy, or Newman. I am not referring to Alice when I call out 'Alice!' — I am trying to get her attention. When I say to Andy 'Hello Andy', I am not referring to him, I'm greeting him. When Jerry says '*Newman*', he's expressing his anger at Newman, and he could have done that by saying 'Arrrgh', or shaking his fist, or scowling, or any number of other things none of which involve any kind of reference to Newman. These are all cases in which someone uses a referring expression that refers to some individual without performing a speech act of reference to that individual.

If this is correct it means that we can analyze acts of reference in terms of the satisfaction conditions of the illocutionary acts of which they are components. To refer to an individual x is to perform an illocutionary act whose satisfaction conditions essentially and ineliminably involve x. For example, when I say 'Hillary Clinton lives in

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[8] "Naming appears as a *queer* connection of a word with an object. — And you really get such a queer connection when a philosopher tries to bring out *the* relation between name and thing by staring at an object in front of him and repeating a name or even the word "this" innumerable times," (Wittgenstein 1953, §38, p.16).

New York' I perform an assertion that is true if and only if Hillary Clinton lives in New York. Because these truth-conditions essentially involve Hillary Clinton, I referred to Hillary Clinton in my utterance. Or suppose I ask 'Does Hillary Clinton live in New York?'. In this case my question is answered by assertions whose truth-conditions essentially involve Hillary Clinton, i.e. the assertion that she lives in New York or the assertion that she doesn't. Suppose someone replies 'Yes' to my question. On the present account, the speaker referred to Hillary Clinton by saying 'Yes', since she said something whose truth-conditions essentially involve Hillary Clinton, even though she hasn't uttered any linguistic expression that refers to Clinton. It follows that it is possible to refer to an individual in a speech act without using any linguistic device that refers to that individual in that context. Here's another example. Suppose I say to Hillary Clinton: 'Please move to Minnesota'. In this case my request is satisfied if and only if Hillary Clinton moves to Minnesota. These fulfillment conditions essentially involve Hillary Clinton, and so I referred to her when I made the request, even though I didn't use a name or any other referring device that refers to Hillary Clinton.

Obviously, much more needs to be said by way of refining and clarifying this account of the speech act of reference. I can't do that here, but let me close with a few final remarks about what it means for satisfaction conditions to *essentially and ineliminably* involve some individual x. Suppose I assert 'The 2016 Democratic presidential nominee lives in New York'. The truth conditions for this assertion involve Hillary Clinton, but they don't *essentially* involve Hillary Clinton. It could have been that Bernie Sanders won the 2016 Democratic nomination. In that case, my assertion would have been true if and only if Bernie Sanders lives in New York. By contrast, when I say 'Hillary Clinton lives in New York', the truth of my assertion invariably depends on whether Hillary Clinton lives in New York, even when we consider different possible ways for the world to be. To adapt Kripke's terminology, these truth-conditions *rigidly* depend on the facts about Hillary Clinton (Kripke 1982). No matter which possible world we consider, it is always Hillary Clinton's place of residence that matters for the truth of an assertion that Hillary Clinton lives in New York.

Generalizing this to other kinds of speech acts, the claim is that to refer to an individual is to perform an illocutionary act whose satisfaction conditions rigidly depend on or involve that individual. More needs to be said to clarify what this means, but that would take us into the intricacies of speech act theory and beyond the scope of this essay.

4. Conclusion

Reference can be understood as a relation between linguistic expressions and things or as an action that people perform. This essay has focused on the latter, in particular the acts of reference that people perform using linguistic expressions. I started with the natural thought that these actions are more fundamental than the relation of linguistic reference, but that gave way to the idea that both acts of reference and linguistic reference are mutually dependent aspects of the complex set of practices and norms that constitute the more encompassing phenomenon of reference. In the second half of the essay I argued that acts of reference are always elements of more complex illocutionary acts with satisfaction conditions, such as assertions, questions, orders, and promises. This allowed for an account of acts of reference in terms of the satisfaction conditions of

these acts: to refer to an individual is to perform an illocutionary act whose satisfaction conditions essentially or rigidly depend on that individual. This locates the analysis of the speech act of reference squarely within the theory of illocutionary acts, and the theory of intentional action more generally.[9]

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