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On the Distinction between Fictional and Intentional Objects

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1. Introduction

The approach

Pay close attention to natural language. Uncover the ontology that is implicit in natural language – the ontology of natural language.

Fictional and nonexistent objects:

A common view:

Fictional objects are nonexistent objects.

The view defended here:

Fictional objects as parts of literary works are abstract artifacts, and thus exist.

But natural language also reflects nonexistent objects – *intentional objects*.

The two sorts of objects, fictional and intentional objects, depend in different ways on referential acts:

Fictional objects ontologically depend on an *intention* to create a piece of fiction.

Intentional objects ontologically depend only on the acts of *attributing properties* within the fiction.

Intentional objects are not merely possible objects (Priest 2005, Berto 2008) or objects individuated in terms of combinations of properties (Zalta 1988), which would be available semantically even in the absence of a referential act in the semantic structure of the sentence. But in fact, intentional objects require the presence of quasireferential acts in the *semantic structure of the sentence*, which reflects their ontological dependence on those acts.

2. Intentional and fictional objects in the semantics of natural language

2.1. The distinction between intentional and fictional objects

Intentional objects

Nonexistent objects of imagining, conceiving, thinking about, referring to, describing, mentioning, intending.

Intentional ‘nonexistent’ objects in the semantic structure of natural language

- Intentional objects of various sorts play a role in semantics.
- But they do not come for free. Rather they require the presence of mental or linguistic acts *in the semantic structure of the sentence*.
- There are two ways in which objects may ontologically dependent on such acts
 1. as abstract artifacts *intentionally produced by such acts : fictional characters*
 2. as entities *non-intentionally generated by such acts : intentional object*.

The predicate *exist*

The predicate *exist* can deny the existence of intentional objects, but not of fictional objects.

Explicit reference to a fictional character (1a) and to an intentional object (1b):

- (1) a. The fictional character Anna Karenina exists.
- b. The woman described in the novel ‘Anna Karenina’ does not exist.

With simple fictional proper names generally reference to an intentional object:

- (2) Anna Karenina exists.

Unlike (1a), (2) is generally judged as false.

The very same work of fiction gives rise to both the intentional object and the fictional character!

3. Intentional objects in natural language semantics

3.1. Motivation for positing intentional objects

Intentional objects act as semantic values and are needed for the compositional semantics of sentences with intentional verbs, such as *imagine*, *conceive*, *think about*, *refer to*, *mention*, *intend*.

Standard cases in the literature: indefinites / definites describing intentional objects

(3) a. John imagined a castle / a round circle.

b. John imagined something.

Semantics possible without intentional objects:

Indefinite NPs contribute higher-order values or parts of complex predicates;
something acts as a higher-order quantifier.

Constructions requiring intentional objects in the semantics of natural language

- Compositionally complex subjects with intentional predicates
- Anaphora

(4) a. The castle John *is imagining* is small, but nice. It is definitely not grand

b. The mathematical object that John *imagined* is impossible. It is both round and square.

(5) a. The castle that John *is imagining* does not exist.

b. The mathematical object that John *is imagining* cannot possibly exist.

- Negative existentials

Problems treating subject NPs in true negative existential sentences as being *merely empty terms*:

1. Focus

(6) The king of France does not exist.

Salmon's (1998) account: the negation in a negative existential as in (6) is external negation - 'metalinguistic negation' in the sense of Horn (1985).

Metalinguistic negation:

(7) The king of France is not bald, because there is no king of France.

In (7) focus is on *not*, rather than, as with ordinary negation, the predicate.

However, in negative existentials (6), the predicate is focused.

2. With quantificational subjects, external negation, that is, negation taking widest scope, cannot be attested, unless *not* is strongly focused:

(8) a. Everyone we talked about does not exist.

b. At least two people we talked about do not exist.

3. External negation is inapplicable to exception sentences:

(9) Everyone we talked about except Anna Karenina exists.

3.2. Constraints on intentional objects in the semantics of natural language

Intentional objects do not come for free, but depend on the description of a quasi-referential act in the sentence, or at least an implicit reference to such an act. Not every non-referring description ‘generates’ an intentional object.

(10) a. ?? The church in the village does not exist.

b. The church *mentioned* in the guide does not exist.

(11) a. ?? There is a house that does not exist.

b. There is a house John *described* that does not exist.

(12) a. ??? Mary talked to a man that does not exist.

b. Mary *described* a man that does not exist.

Intentional adjectives:

(13) a. The *imagined* / *imaginary* church does not exist.

b. The *mentioned building* does not exist.

Linguistic task

Allow for semantic analysis of NPs modified by relative clauses with intentional verbs

(5a) The castle John is imagining does not exist.

The noun *castle* in (5a) cannot be interpreted in the position in which it appears overtly, as head of the relative clauses. Otherwise, it would have to be interpreted with respect to D_u .

Needs to be interpreted within the scope of the event quantifier associated with *imagine*, so that its denotation will come from $D_e \cup D_u$, for an event of imagination e .

Analysis of relative clauses, on which the head noun originates inside the relative clause (Cinque 2020).

(14) a. [the e [John is imagining [e [castle]]]]

If the underlying structure with the noun in the lower position is interpreted, this permits the following interpretation:

(14) b. $\lambda x[\exists e(\text{imagine}(e, \text{John}, x) \ \& \ \text{castle}(x))]$

Subjects without intentional modifiers

Are acceptable as long as their use involves implicit reference to a historical chain of quasireferential acts.

Spontaneous descriptions vs uses of historical descriptions / proper names:

(15) a. ???The blue apples in this room do not exist.

b. ??? Mumu does not exist.

c. The golden mountain / Pegasus does not exist.

(15c) involves implicit reference to quasi-referential acts - more precisely, to a chain of preceding quasi-referential acts involving versions of the same name or description.

Descriptions or names not associated with such a chain of preceding quasi-referential acts (15a, b) are not acceptable as subjects of true negative existentials.

Conclusion

Intentional objects are entities 'generated by' unsuccessful or pretend referential mental or linguistic acts (or states)

Quasi-referential acts (property attributions)

- unsuccessful mental or linguistic acts of reference (or property attribution)
- pretend mental or linguistic acts of reference (or property attribution)

Intentional objects are entities *ontologically dependent* on quasi-referential acts.

Like *abstract artifacts* in general, they involve ontological dependence as a generating relation, not a causal relation.

3.3. Further support for the semantic dependence of intentional objects on intentional acts

Implicit arguments cannot be non-existents.

1. *Davidsonian event semantics*

Events are implicit arguments of verbs (Davidson 1967). Davidsonian event arguments cannot be nonexistent entities. (16a) cannot have the interpretation given in (16b):

(16) a. John did not walk.

b. There is a particular planned walk that John failed to do.

The reason is that implicit arguments do not semantically connect to a quasi-referential act and thus could not obtain the status as nonexistent.

2. *Implicit location arguments*

The verb *to rain* arguably takes a location as an implicit argument. But a speaker can hardly refer to a particular fictional location with *it rained*, meaning that it rained at that fictional location.

Reference to nonexistent objects is possible, though, with the internal argument of *relational nouns*:

(17) There is one remarkable fact about the (nonexistent) woman John read about.

Her *passport* is said to be French.

Here the internal argument the relational noun, the passport holder, is an individual already introduced through the use of an intentional predicate (*read about*) in the previous sentence.

4. The importance of coordination as a relation among referential acts

The relation of *coordination* in roughly Fine's (2007) sense of coordination plays an important role for anaphora standing for intentional objects. But coordination not understood as a relation among occurrences of expressions in a sentence (as in Fine 2007), but among linguistic or mental acts, as a relation among quasi-referential acts

(18) John imagined *a castle* and then he imagined that *it* was near another castle.

(19) Coordination among quasi-referential acts

If two referential acts *e* and *e'* are *coordinated* and *e* and *e'* are / were to be successful, then there is / would be an entity *d* such that *e* and *e'* refer / would refer both to *d*.

Coordination as a relation among referential acts also provides a semantics of coordination as a relation among occurrences of NPs, that is, F-coordination ('Finean coordination'), as opposed to syntactic coordination of NPs with *and* or *or*:

(20) Semantics of F-coordination

For a literal utterance of a sentence *S* containing *F-coordinated* occurrences of NPs *X_i* and *Y_i*, the utterance of *S* is true or false only if the speaker intends to refer to the same thing with the utterance of *X_i* and the utterance of *Y_i*.

Coordination among referential acts constitutes the content of F-coordination as a relation among referential NPs.

Coordination of acts also relevant for the semantics of anaphora in *intentional identity cases*.

Coordination of mental or linguistic acts may be indirect:

Beliefs can be coordinated if they are directed toward a common source (Hob-Nob sentences).

5. Introducing intentional objects

Intentional object are generated by coordinated quasi-referential acts.

Semantics

(21) For a name N , for an individual d and a chain e of coordinated referential uses of N ,

$[N]^{<u, e>} = d$ iff the referential acts making up e either refer to d or, if they are quasi-referential acts, generate d as an intentional object.

(22) For a definite description $the\ N'$, for an individual d and a chain e of coordinated referential uses of X ,

$[the\ N']^{<u, e>} = d$ iff $d \in [N']$, whereby there is no other d' , $d' \in [N']$, or if e consists of quasi-referential acts and generate d as an intentional object.

Ontology

Assumptions:

1. Intentional state or act consist of acts of the form $a(P)(r)$, where $a(P)$ is an act of attributing the (nuclear) property P to what r is meant to refer to.
2. Distinction between ‘having’ a property and ‘holding’ a property (Parsons (1980) and Zalta (2015) and distinction between nuclear properties (which are ‘held’) and extranuclear properties (which are ‘had’):

Intentional objects have extranuclear properties such as existing, being intentional objects etc. They do not ‘have’ nuclear properties such as being a horse, being red etc., but rather they ‘hold’ such properties, the sorts of properties attributed to them in the intentional state or act.

Intentional objects are obtained from or generated by intentional acts or states involving quasi-referential acts on the basis of the conditions of the following sort:

(23) For an intentional state or act e , d is an intentional object generated by e ($INT(e, d)$) iff

d depends for its existence on a quasi-referential act r that is part of e and d holds a property P just in case the following holds: for the act e $a(P)(r)$, the act of predicating P of what r is meant to stand for. $a(P)(r)$ is part of e or $a(P)(r')$ is part of e for a referential act r' coordinated with r , if

Distinguish different domains for semantic interpretation:

1. the ordinary domain D_u of entities associated with the utterance u of the entire sentence, the domain of actual entities.
2. for each intentional act or state e in D_u , there will be an associated domain D_e of intentional objects dependent on e .

Semantic conditions

An act of imagination e generates a (possibly empty) domain D_e of intentional objects dependent on e .

The denotation of an existence-entailing predicate is a subset of D_u .

The denotation of a non-existence-entailing, intentional predicate X involves both D_u and D_e for a Davidsonian event argument e of X .

(24) Condition on the extension of *imagine*

For an event e , such that for entities d and d' , $\langle e, d, d' \rangle \in [imagine]$, then $d \in D_u$ and $d' \in D_e \cup D_u$.

For an *existence predicate* X , a distinction between the *positive extension* X^+ of X and the *negative extension* X^- of X is required:

- (25) a. If for an entity d , $d \in [exist]^{+\langle u, e \rangle}$, then $d \in D_u$
 b. If for an entity d , $d \in [exist]^{-\langle u, e \rangle}$, then $d \in D_e$.
 c. NP *does not exist* is true iff $[NP] \in [exist]^{-\langle u, e \rangle}$
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6. Fictional characters as existing entities

- (26) a. The fictional character Anna Karenina exists.
 b. ??? Anna Karenina exists.

What makes something be a fictional character?

A piece of fiction about a single entity generates two nonexistent objects.

- Entity generated by mental acts of pretend referring and predicating → intentional object
- Entity generated also by *mental state of intending* a fictional character as part of a story → fictional character

Two kinds of ontological dependence

1. Non-intended products, generated by coordinated quasi-referential acts and associated property attributions

Compare the singleton set containing a musical work, the non-intended product generated by acts of musical composition

2. Part of an intended artifact (fiction)
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7. Intentional objects and objects of satisfaction

Attitudinal objects

beliefs, claims, speculations, requests, decisions, intentions, hopes, fears

- Agent-dependent concrete mental or illocutionary objects
- Have satisfaction conditions of various sorts

Imaginations

- Concrete: agent-dependent, in time
- Have no satisfaction conditions (when not directed toward reality)

(27) ??? Mary's imagination was true / satisfied / was carried out / was satisfied.

Imaginations (when not directed toward reality) have no purpose, unlike claims, requests, decisions, hopes, ...

Objects generated by successful or unsuccessful referential act and pretend property attributions need to be distinguished from the *object actually being referred to*:

(28) The country Mary had been imagining was quite different from the country she actually experienced.

Objects of imagination can trigger or be presupposed by attitudinal objects with fulfillment, realization, correctness, or appropriateness conditions - desires (satisfaction conditions), plans and decisions (realization conditions), emotions (appropriateness conditions)

Leads to connection between intentional and intensional transitive verbs:

Compatibility of content with sufficiently unspecific imagination:

(29) a. John imagined a castle.

b. John wants a castle.

(30) a. John wants what he imagined.

b. John imagined what he wants.

But intensional transitives generally describe objects (searches, desires, needs, debts etc) with satisfaction conditions, which permits the ‘object’ of a search being identical to an actual object:

(31) This is the house John was looking for.

Not so for imaginations:

(32) ??? This is the house John imagined.

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