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Philadelphia is difficult to spell

Stefano Predelli

University of Nottingham, Nottingham NG72RD, United Kingdom



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ABSTRACT

This paper is officially devoted to the analysis of 'Philadelphia is difficult to spell'. I challenge what I call the *Mention Hypothesis*, namely the notion that the expression 'Philadelphia' must be mentioned at a level suitable for the interpretation of that sentence. After the exploration of two use-based alternatives, I proceed to the defence of a *Contextual Hypothesis*. I conclude with a discussion of the consequences of the Contextual Hypothesis, its theoretical implementation, and its relationships with other semantics matters.

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Consider the following extract from a recent article:

(1) Philadelphia is difficult to spell (Smith, 2011).

Not many, I suppose, have much of a problem in deciphering the intended message, roughly having to do with the name of a certain American location. More than a few remain nevertheless tempted to reach for the red pen: the 'correct', 'appropriate', or 'most perspicuous' rendering of (1), so they insist, is

(1m) 'Philadelphia' is difficult to spell,

namely a sentence that semantically expresses a proposition about a certain twelve-letter expression.

Since (1m) mentions the expression 'Philadelphia', I refer to this stance as the *Mention Hypothesis*. The thesis defended in what follows is that the Mention Hypothesis is incorrect, and that it ought to be replaced by what I call the *Contextual Hypothesis*.

Paraphrasing Russell's remark on his analysis of 'the', the Contextual Hypothesis's approach to (1) 'may seem a somewhat incredible interpretation' of that sentence (Russell, 1905: 482). Here as in Russell's case, the evidence in its favour 'is derived from the difficulties which seem unavoidable' from the viewpoint of its rivals. Accordingly, I build my case for the Contextual Hypothesis by challenging the Mention Hypothesis in section one, and two simple use-based approaches in section two. The

E-mail address: Stefano.predelli@nottingham.ac.uk.

final section of this paper discusses some further applications of the Contextual Hypothesis, and the available alleys for its systematic implementation.

1. The trouble with mention

I have no qualms with the notion that, sometimes, (1m) may do a better job when it comes to the analysis of inscriptions of (1). In a moment of hurry, or on occasions with preciously little ink at her disposal, even the most diligent writer may scribble a shape closely resembling the marks displayed in (1), while unequivocally intending it as a (less than perfectly formed) token of (1m). In these cases, *perhaps*, it is (1m) that ought to guide the semantic interpretation of her conversational contribution, rather than the sequence she actually inscribed.¹

Perhaps. But the Mention Hypothesis makes a stronger claim: according to it, the interpretation of any plausible inscription of (1) ought to deliver the sort of results derivable from the compositional analysis of (1m), a sentence overtly involving reference to ‘Philadelphia’, rather than to Philadelphia.

This preliminary presentation of the attitude that motivates the Mention Hypothesis remains deliberately nebulous when it comes to the alleged relationship between (1) and (1m), and only vaguely gestures towards the idea that, for one reason or another, (1m) provides a ‘more perspicuous’ layout for the interpretation of typical inscriptions of (1). This is as it should be: for my purposes here, the point with (1m) is that of manifesting the semantic outcomes which the Mention Hypothesis takes to be appropriate on those occasions. Accordingly, what interests me are neither quotation marks *per se*, nor the details in the role that well punctuated layouts may play in the study of quote-deprived instances such as (1).² Conversely, my considerations are intended to be equally relevant for those who resist the temptation of the inverted commas, and argue that (1) is in the position of achieving outcomes of mention *as it stands*.³ In a nutshell: it is the very appeal to mention that characterizes any position I subsume under my label, regardless of one’s views about quotation, the semantics of punctuation devices, or the suitability of this or that typographical artefact.

Its popularity notwithstanding, the Mention Hypothesis is not a promising alley to pursue when it comes to examples closely related to (1), such as

- (2) Pittsburgh is the most misspelled city in America (Bennett, 2007)

or

- (3) [there were other things] she learned after she left for Chicago, or was it San Diego, or some other city ending with O (Morrison, 1992: 41).⁴

Surely, the point is not that ‘Pittsburgh’ is the most misspelled city in America, or that someone left for ‘Chicago’ or some other city, since both of these claims entail the preposterous notion that some expressions are urban agglomerates. Indeed, the Mention Hypothesis yields undesirable outcomes even when it comes to occurrences of (1) within larger constructs. Cases of adjectival modification, coordination, or parentheticals provide a sample of what I have in mind: ‘populous Philadelphia is difficult to spell’, ‘Philadelphia is difficult to spell but easy to reach by plane’, and ‘Philadelphia, America’s most popular destination, is difficult to spell’ clearly do not entail that ‘Philadelphia’ is populous, easy to reach by plane, or America’s most popular destination.⁵

Further shortcomings of the Mention Hypothesis shall indirectly emerge as I proceed. But enough has been said to motivate an open minded exploration of alternative options. In fact, since what may be populous, easy to reach, or a popular destination is the bearer of ‘Philadelphia’, the examples discussed thus far not only challenge the Mention Hypothesis, but also recommend analyses that allow for the *use* of ‘Philadelphia’ in the examples under discussion. Accordingly, I devote the next section to the examination of certain simple use-based alternatives, before I proceed to the discussion of its inadequacies and to the presentation of more sophisticated proposals.

2. Two use-based alternatives

It is not absurd to suppose that, in (1), something is being attributed to a city, that is, to the semantic contribution of the *use* of ‘Philadelphia’. Quantified scenarios helpfully underline this possibility: the very same informal settings in which (1) is likely to occur are also hospitable to inscriptions such as ‘some Russian composers begin with *T*’ or ‘some

¹ More precise descriptions of this sort of cases depend on one’s favourite take on typos, inadvertent errors, malapropisms, and other tangential (though independently interesting) phenomena; see among many Davidson (1986), Kaplan (1990), Reimer (2004), and Predelli (2010a).

² For a discussion of alternative approaches to quotation marks see for instance Cappelen and Lepore (2007); on punctuation see Nunberg (1990).

³ According to the defenders of the *Identity Theory* of quotation, just as, in spoken discourse, ‘oral promptings or finger-dance quotes can be omitted’ (Washington, 1994: 588), quotation marks may be ‘omitted in writing as well’ (Saka, 1998: 118), without thereby jeopardizing outcomes of mention. For critical comments, see Garcia-Carpintero (1994) and Cappelen and Lepore (2007).

⁴ Cited in De Brabanter (2003: 205).

⁵ For independent formal approaches to these *co-predication* scenarios see among many Asher (2011), Cooper (2011), and Gotham (2016).

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