Communicating content☆

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A B S T R A C T

This paper aims to develop a unified account of communication, competence and reference fixing that surpasses problems with two of the most influential views on the philosophical market, neodescriptivism and the 'locking' theory. Our charge is that the conditions upon communication are less substantive than the neo-descriptivist account requires and the conditions upon reference-fixing are more substantive than those provided by the locking-view. In order to avoid the problems that neodescriptivist views face (e.g. holism), we suggest that the shareability of a specific set of inferences, or dispositions to infer, is not a prerequisite for conceptual shareability. In order to avoid the infamous 'which-properties-speakers-lock-on' problem of the locking-view, we establish a more robust causal relation between concepts and their referents.

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1. Introduction

Communication is probably the most ubiquitous social phenomenon and the primary means through which social interaction occurs. This paper aims to develop a theory of communication that surpasses problems with two of the most influential views on the philosophical market. It does this, primarily, through the introduction and explication of a "representational core", which combines the virtues of both causal reference-fixing stories and concept-fixing descriptions, with none (or at least, less) of their respective pitfalls.

The first view, neo-descriptivism, perhaps most rigorously advanced by Frank Jackson (1998, 2000, 2004) suggests that competent speakers of a natural language must assent to a shared set of descriptive meanings associated with a linguistic token. It is through these descriptive meanings that the property picked out by a term can be identified (they fix the reference of the term), and the descriptive meanings are also shared by other competent users of the term, and thus conveyed through communication.[1] However, understanding competence with a public term in terms of shared knowledge rests upon controversial psychological assumptions, and grounding communication in shared reference-fixing content runs into problems with interpersonal variance when speakers *seem* to engage in communicative acts whilst diverging in the beliefs, dispositions and inferences that are associated with the same linguistic term. This suggests that it is possible for speakers to

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☆ This paper was fully collaborative; the order of names of authors is arbitrary.

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[1] The details of Jackson's neo-descriptivism have been questioned elsewhere (e.g. Byrne and Pryor, 2006; Block and Stalnaker, 1999; Nimtz, 2004), on the terms of his allegiance to a form of descriptivism. Though, to some extent these may miss the mark because of Jackson's reformulation in terms of cognitive abilities.

possess the same concept, and thus engage in univocal conversation about a subject matter, whilst assenting to substantively diverging descriptive meanings.

An alternative position, defended by Jerry Fodor (1998) is a 'locking' theory, which suggests that concept possession can be grounded in contextual links between speakers and properties. Whilst the position is able to deal with the divergence of roles different speakers associate with their terms, it fails to account for the epistemic access that speakers have to the subject matter under discussion. In this case, it is unclear how we can tell when speakers are appropriately 'locked on' to the same set of properties.

In essence, our charge is that the conditions upon communication are *less* substantive than the neo-descriptivist account requires and the conditions upon reference-fixing are *more* substantive than those provided by the locking view. More specifically, in order to avoid the aforementioned 'which-properties-speakers-lock-on' problem, we focus on the process of concept acquisition and establish a more robust causal relation between mind and world (concepts and their referents). At the same time, we suggest a way to avoid the problems that neo-descriptivist views face by appealing to conceptual individuation conditions. Namely, we suggest that the shareability of a *specific* set of inferences, or dispositions to infer, is not a prerequisite for conceptual shareability. Instead, partial overlap between the constituent parts of a given concept (see below) of two individuals should suffice to establish grounds for communication. In the interest of avoiding making individuation conditions too liberal, we flesh out the minimum conditions for communication in terms of individuation conditions and cognitive content (the connections of a given concept to other concepts). Statistical co-occurrence of properties across instances of a given kind allows for the shareability of concepts and in turn enables communication.

In §2, we briefly outline the key problematic in this debate; in §3 we suggest a way to avoid the problems that proponents of the locking view face. Finally, we try to accommodate the problems of neo-descriptivist accounts (§4).

2. The current debate

Whilst the contours of the debate are well-known, we rehearse them briefly here for the sake of identifying the specific innovations of the view suggested in §3. For neo-descriptivism, it is essential for communication that speakers grasp the meaning of their terms in order for that content to be conveyed and shared with interlocutors (see Stalnaker, 1984, ch.1; Jackson, 2000, 331). Roughly, representational content constitutes (or partly constitutes) the way in which a speaker thinks about a certain subject matter, and so represents the world as being. And, according to Jackson, it is a form of descriptive meaning associated with linguistic terms that captures this kind of content. It is accessibility to this descriptive meaning that must be possessed by all interlocutors in order to ground successful communication (i.e., the process during which a speaker successfully conveys what she intended to the hearer).

Descriptive meaning was traditionally thought to result from treating a term *t* as a non-rigidified description D, where an entity x is the referent of *t* iff x is uniquely D. There are, however, well known and influential arguments against this kind of descriptivism suggested by Kripke (1980); Putnam (1975); Byrne and Pryor 2006; Block and Stalnaker 1999; Nimtz 2004, on the basis that counterexamples can be found to practically any determinable candidate for descriptive reference-fixing criteria. Neo-descriptivism suggests, in response, that descriptive meanings are *implicit*, and may only be revealed in a speaker's use of a term across hypothetical scenarios. For example, competent users of a term have an implicit ability to evaluate conditionals such as the following[2]:

(E) If D, then $<$ water $=$ H$_2$O $>$

(Where D witnesses a set of empirical circumstances).

It is this *ability* that allows a speaker to articulate the descriptive meaning associated with their terms, and is purportedly bestowed upon a speaker simply in virtue of possessing the relevant concepts.[3] When it comes to communication, Jackson argues that it is highly plausible that, even if speakers cannot fully articulate the reference-fixing properties associated with a term, they must nonetheless have an implicit grasp of those properties ensuring that the term has the referent it does:

> Genuine […] disagreement, as opposed to mere talking past one another, requires a background of shared […] opinion to fix a common, or near enough common, set of meanings for our […] terms. We can think of the rather general principles that we share as the commonplaces or platitudes or constitutive principles that make up the core we need to share in order to count as speaking a common […] language.

There are a number of issues that may be identified with this account. One straightforward problem with this view is that the data that psychologists have uncovered about human categorization looks to be in conflict with the suggestion that concepts can be represented by precise conditions (e.g. Murphy, 2002). These, now widely accepted, results suggest that categorization is rather a loose matter, in which some members of a category are considered to be more typical of that

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[2] See Chalmers and Jackson 2001 §3, Jackson 1998, pp. 211–12, and for criticism Byrne and Pryor.

[3] A second distinction with traditional descriptivism is that this kind of meaning does not constitute beliefs about the underlying properties themselves; rather it provides a "template" for identifying the underlying properties, which must then be filled in with the relevant a posteriori information in that context.