

Descriptive ineffability reconsidered

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Received 4 May 2015; received in revised form 17 December 2015; accepted 18 December 2015

Available online 21 January 2016

Abstract

Ordinary competent language speakers experience difficulty in paraphrasing words such as 'the', 'but' or 'however' as compared to words such as 'chair' or 'run'. The difficulty experienced in the first case is sometimes called descriptive ineffability. In recent debates about meaning types in pragmatics and philosophy of language, descriptive ineffability has been used as a test for the presence of expressive (as opposed to descriptive) meaning, or procedural (as opposed to conceptual) meaning. However, the notion of descriptive ineffability is controversial and in need of further clarification. In this paper I provide two arguments that descriptive ineffability is not a good criterion for distinguishing between types of meaning. First, I show that the effability/ineffability divide does not line up with distinctions in meaning type. Second, I argue that several effability/ineffability patterns are best explained not by the meaning types of words but by differences in the range and scope of speakers' metalinguistic ability to paraphrase, as it is shaped by experience throughout their lives. © 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Descriptive ineffability; Descriptive/expressive meaning; Procedural/conceptual meaning; Metalinguistic abilities

1. Introduction

When asked about the meaning of the words 'chair' or 'run', a competent speaker of English will typically provide some better or worse definition-like paraphrase. But if asked about the meaning of the words 'the' or 'but', she would probably have a hard time coming up with a paraphrase (although she could provide sentences where the word is used and thus manage to elucidate their meanings). The difficulty experienced in the second case is a first approximation to what has been called *descriptive ineffability* (Blakemore, 2002, 2011; Potts, 2007, 2008; Gutzmann, 2013).¹

Descriptive ineffability is an interesting phenomenon. A common way to theorize about language and its meaning (in both linguistics and philosophy of language) is to appeal to speakers' intuitive judgements (Devitt, 2012). In particular, it is often claimed that speakers have some access to the meanings of at least some words, and are thus capable of paraphrasing them. Speakers' intuitive judgements, in particular those involving paraphrases, play an important role in analyses of word meaning; we should therefore care about the fact that there often seems to be a limit to speakers' ability to paraphrase. The phenomenon of descriptive ineffability – that is, the inability of speakers to call to mind a paraphrase of certain words – has been used to distinguish regular content words (e.g. 'chair', 'run') from other types of words in several

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¹ The first use of the term can be found in Potts (2007, p. 76–77). However, Blakemore (2002) appeals to a similar notion and Wilson and Sperber (1993) (p. 17) remark on the phenomenon, although without using that exact term.

recent debates about word meaning. My main aim in this paper is to estimate the utility of descriptive ineffability as evidence in debates about types of meaning and to provide a way of understanding the phenomenon.

The notion of descriptive ineffability figures prominently in a variety of distinctions in linguistics and philosophy of language. In linguistics, it is associated with functional (grammatical) categories: words like ‘the’, ‘whether’ and ‘is’, and is taken to be part of what distinguishes them from content (lexical) categories: words like ‘cat’, ‘green’ and ‘drink’. More extensive use has been made of the notion in recent debates about meaning types in pragmatics and philosophy of language: for instance, in Potts’ (2007) characterization of *expressive* (as opposed to *descriptive*) meaning and Blakemore’s (2002, 2011) account of *procedural* (as opposed to *conceptual*) meaning. As will become clear in Section 2, these are separate, non-overlapping theoretical distinctions. But in both cases descriptive ineffability is seen as providing one of the criteria for distinguishing between two word categories or two types of meaning.

It is generally acknowledged, even by those who use it, that the notion of descriptive ineffability is controversial and in need of further clarification (Potts, 2007).² Moreover, the notion has already been criticized. Bezuidenhout (2004) doubts its classificatory potential in the case of the conceptual/procedural distinction, and Geurts (2007) argues that descriptive ineffability is not “the prerogative of expressive meaning” (*contra* Potts, 2007), since “it is present all over the lexicon”.

Is descriptive ineffability a good criterion for distinguishing between types of meaning? Can we take the vividness and stability of descriptive ineffability as a brute fact? In this paper I argue that we cannot, and nor should we take the theoretical utility of the notion for granted. I start by investigating what participants in the debate about meaning types have in mind when they speak of *descriptive ineffability* and what theoretical utility appeals to *descriptive ineffability* have for them. I propose that the notion of descriptive ineffability, as it is used in several recent debates, can be characterized as *non-paraphrasability in a (moderately) strong sense* (Section 3). In order to estimate the theoretical utility of the notion, I discuss two objections that have been put forward against the use of descriptive ineffability (Section 4).

My main claim is that there is a potentially serious problem for those such as Potts (2007) and Blakemore (2002) who appeal to descriptive ineffability in classifying meaning types. On this approach, descriptive ineffability is a mark of a certain type of meaning, in that a word’s ineffability is *best explained* by its having a certain kind of meaning (e.g. the word ‘the’ is ineffable because the meaning of ‘the’ is procedural/grammatical, etc.). I provide two arguments against the classificatory use of descriptive ineffability (Section 5). First, I argue that the effability/ineffability divide does not line up with distinctions in meaning type. Second, I argue that several effability/ineffability patterns are best explained not by the meaning types of words but by differences in the range and scope of speakers’ metalinguistic ability to paraphrase, as it is shaped by experience throughout their lives.

My main conclusion is then that the classificatory use of descriptive ineffability (i.e. its use as a self-standing test for a particular meaning type) is problematic. However, I leave open the possibility that descriptive ineffability might provide supplementary data of a defeasible kind. I suggest that systematic theoretical and empirical work has to be done before this notion can be used to classify meaning types. In Section 6, I show that there are several different levels of descriptive ineffability in natural language, an observation which makes the phenomenon richer and more complex and may be seen as a first step in the systematic theoretical study of the notion.

2. The uses of descriptive ineffability

The notion of descriptive ineffability figures in a variety of research programs in linguistics, pragmatics and recently in philosophy of language. As we shall see, in these debates the notion of descriptive ineffability is used in characterizing either the category a word belongs to or a meaning type. Linguists (of diverse theoretical persuasions) typically distinguish between content and function words, or between lexical and functional/grammatical categories. In brief, content words have descriptive meaning in that they denote objects, events, abstract entities etc. Most nouns, verbs and adjectives are content words. Function words also have meaning, but in a different way: they are identified mainly by the functions they perform in the sentence. Determiners, pronouns, conjunctions, some verbs with (intuitively) little meaning like ‘be’, ‘should’ or ‘must’, are all function words (as are various grammatical particles and inflections). Content words are further distinguished by the fact that they are open class items – it is possible to coin new ones – while function words are closed class items (Aronoff and Fundeman, 2011).³

In the Chomskyan tradition, Smith (2004) divides lexical items into lexical and functional categories, where lexical categories include nouns, verbs and adjectives, and functional categories are determiners, auxiliary verbs, complementizers, tense and inflectional elements. Lexical categories are described as having “meaning or content

² Potts writes, “I agree with my commentators that, as a theoretical notion, descriptive ineffability needs a clearer statement.” (2007, p. 8).

³ The divide between function/content words is to some extent arbitrary. For example, prepositions in general are a closed class category. However, some prepositions (locative *in* or *on* or directional *to*) are more like content/lexical words, while others (infinitival or goal-marking *to* in *I gave it to her* or the *preposition on* in *rely on*) are more like function words. For a similar point see my summary of Neil Smith’s observations on p. 8.

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