

This is a preprint of an article whose final and definitive form will be /is published in the Australasian Journal of Philosophy [2016-17]. The Australasian Journal of Philosophy is available online at: <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/>.

Referential Intentions and Communicative Luck.

Andrew Peet

Abstract

Brian Loar [1976] observed that communicative success with singular terms requires more than correct referent assignment. For communicative success to be achieved the audience must assign the right referent in the right way. Loar, and others since, took this to motivate Fregean accounts of the semantics of singular terms. Ray Buchanan [2014] has recently responded, maintaining that although Loar is correct to claim that communicative success with singular terms requires more than correct referent assignment, this is compatible with direct reference approaches, as long as one also endorses independently motivated Gricean view of communicative intentions. This paper argues that Buchanan's Gricean view cannot account for the full range of Loar cases. In doing so it aims to explicate the structure of Loar's cases and thus clarify the conditions a theory must meet in order to adequately meet Loar's challenge.

1. Loar Cases.

Loar [1976] presents the following case as a counterexample to direct reference views of singular terms:

Suppose that Smith and Jones are unaware that the man being interviewed on television is someone they see on the train every morning and about whom, in that latter role, they have just been talking. Smith says 'He is a stockbroker', intending to refer to the man on television; Jones takes Smith to be referring to

the man on the train. Now Jones, as it happens, has correctly identified Smith's referent, since the man on television is the man on the train; but he has failed to understand Smith's utterance. [Loar 1976: 357]

Loar is surely correct that communication has failed in this case. It is merely a matter of luck that the correct referent was assigned. Loar's intuition, and that of many following him (such as Récanati [1993, 1995]; Heck [1995, 2002]; Bezuidenhout [1997]; Paul [1999]), was that the problem lies in the fact that Smith thinks of the referent in a significantly different way to Jones. That is, Jones thinks of the referent through a 'man on the train' mode of presentation, and Smith thinks of him through a 'man on television' mode of presentation. Thus, it seems that Fregean modes of presentation are relevant to communicative success. Recovery of the correct referent is not sufficient.

2. Buchanan's Response.

Buchanan [2014] agrees that such cases show that recovery of the correct reference is insufficient for communicative success. However, he argues that this is compatible with the view that singular terms refer directly, as long as one also adopts an independently motivated Gricean view of communication. Buchanan gives a variant on a Loar case which involves only non-verbal communication. He provides a Gricean diagnosis, and argues that it carries over to Loar cases involving singular terms. Buchanan's case is as follows:

In observance of a religious holiday, Smith is forbidden to read, write, or speak

for the day. Because Smith is looking so bored, his friend, Jones, tells Smith he will take him to a movie, but they need to decide what to see. It is mutual knowledge between them that a cowboy movie entitled 'Flat-top Mountain' is one of the many movies playing at their local Cineplex. Smith grabs his notebook and draws a mountain (in clear view of Jones), intending to communicate thereby that he would like to go to see *Flat-top Mountain*. Jones, however, mistakes the drawing for one of a cowboy hat, and infers thereby that Smith would like to go to see *Flat-top Mountain*. [Buchanan 2014: 62]

Once again it seems that communication has broken down despite the fact that the correct content was recovered. However, no singular terms were used in this case. Indeed, no terms were used at all, the case was purely non-linguistic. To diagnose the problem Buchanan draws our attention to the Gricean view of speaker intentions:

(Comm.) S intends to communicate that p by u only if, for some audience A , S produced u intending (i) A to entertain that p , and (ii) A to recognize that S intends (i) at least in part, on the basis of their recognition that S produced u . [Buchanan, 2014: 64]

As Buchanan observes, this early Gricean view fails as an account of meaning intentions, since there are cases in which these conditions are met, yet the speaker intuitively didn't mean p by their utterance. Grice [1969] soon modified his view to include the requirement that there be some feature of the utterance such that the speaker intends the utterance to have said feature, and intends audience to recognise the feature and use it as a basis in their inference regarding what the speaker intends

(Buchanan, following Schiffer [forthcoming], refers to this feature as the utterance's 'ib-feature'. This stands for 'inference base': a feature the speaker intends the audience to treat as the basis for their inference regarding the intended referent). This condition has been incorporated into subsequent developments of the Gricean programme, such as Bach and Harnish [1979]. Buchanan summarises the modified view of speaker intentions as follows:

(Comm)* S intended to communicate that p by u only if, for some audience A , and some ib-feature ψ of u , S produced u intending (i) A to entertain that p , and (ii) A to recognize that S intends (i) at least in part, on the basis of their recognition that u has ψ . [Buchanan 2014: 62-4]

With (Comm)* in hand it appears we are well placed to explain what is going wrong in Loar cases. When Smith draws a picture of a mountain he intends Jones to recognise it as a mountain, and thereby infer that he wishes to watch 'Flat-Top Mountain'. This is one of the utterance's ib-features. However, Jones misidentifies the ib-feature. Thus, his inference route is inconsistent with that intended by Jones. As a result, Jones's communicative intentions are not satisfied, and communication fails. A similar diagnosis seems to carry over to the stockbroker case. Smith intends Jones to grasp the correct referent in virtue of its being common ground between him and Jones that there is a particular man currently being interviewed on the television. This is one of the utterance's ib-features. Jones recovers the correct referent, but by an inference path inconsistent with Smith's intentions. Thus, communication breaks down. This explanation makes no appeal to Fregean modes of presentation, it merely falls out of an intuitive development of the Gricean view of communicative intentions. Thus, it is

perfectly consistent with direct reference accounts of singular terms.

3. The Residual Problem.

In assessing Buchanan's proposal we must pay attention to the structure of Loar cases. In these cases a speaker intends to communicate a proposition p , and the audience recovers p , but it turns out to be merely a matter of luck that both interlocutors entertained the same proposition. If Buchanan's response is satisfactory it must not be possible for the audience's recovery of the speaker's meaning to be a matter of luck if the conditions for satisfaction of (Comm)* are met. That is, if the audience recovers the intended proposition as a result of their recognition of the utterance's ib-features.

We can think of the conditions set out by (Comm)* in at least two distinct ways. On the first approach there will usually be a certain number of ib-features, and as long as the audience recovers the correct referent in virtue of satisfying the requirements of (Comm)* with respect to these features communication will be successful. This interpretation is suggested by Buchanan, as he only requires that the audience's recovery of the correct content be in part a result of their drawing upon the intended ib-features. This also seems to be the view advocated by Bach and Harnish [1979]. Call this reading of (Comm)* '(Comm-min)' (as this is a minimally demanding reading of (Comm)*). I think that (Comm-min) is the most plausible version of (Comm)*. However, I also believe that (Comm-min) fails to rule out communicative luck. This is because we can always construct a case in which the audience recognises all of the speaker's intended ib-features, and follows the intended inferential path as far as it goes, but then deviates wildly in such a way that they could easily have failed to

recover the correct referent were it not for some coincidence. Consider the following modification of Loar's original example:

Smith and Jones are unaware that the man being interviewed on television is someone they see on the train every morning. Smith says 'He is a stockbroker', intending to refer to the man on television; Jones recognises that Smith is drawing upon their common knowledge that there is a salient man on the television screen, but seeing the similarity between the man on the television and the man they often see on the train he thinks that Smith, who he assumes also recognises the similarity, is talking about the man they see on the train. Now Jones, as it happens, has correctly identified Smith's referent, since the man on television is the man on the train; but he has failed to understand Smith's utterance.

In this case the conditions for (Comm-min) are met. Jones reached the correct interpretation by inference from the intended features of the utterance. However, he still failed to understand Smith's utterance.

It might be objected that Jones's inference was still inconsistent with Smith's intention, as Smith never intended that Jones make a further inference about the similarity between the man on the television and the man on the train. This line of response would require reinterpreting (Comm)* so as to require not only that the audience recover the intended proposition by inferring from the intended ib-features, but that they do so by following the exact inferential path the speaker intends. Call this view (Comm-dem) (as this is a far more demanding reading of (Comm)*). (Comm-dem) is

independently implausible. Firstly, as a psychological claim, it seems unlikely that whenever speakers refer they have a detailed and complete inferential path set out in their mind (whether consciously or unconsciously) for the audience to follow. Secondly, and more importantly, it appears that successful communication is compatible with deviations from the speaker's intended inference plan. This observation goes back to Bach and Harnish [1979] who give the following example:

Suppose *S* says to *H* "Dinner is ready," thereby indirectly requesting *H* to come to the table. *S* intends *H* to reason as follows:

1. *S* is uttering "Dinner is ready."
2. By "Dinner is ready" *S* means 'Dinner is ready.'
3. *S* is saying that dinner is ready.
4. *S* is stating that dinner is ready.
5. *S* is not merely stating that dinner is ready.
6. *H* is hungry.
7. *S* wants *H* (and is requesting *H*) to come to the table.

However, after step 5 *H* reasons differently:

- 6'. *S* gets upset whenever I show no interest in *S*'s cooking.
7. *S* wants me (and is requesting me) to come to the table.

[Bach and Harnish, 1979: 86]

In this case *S* successfully communicates with *H* despite the fact that *H*'s reasoning deviates from *S*'s intended inferential path. So it seems that some deviations are acceptable.

Still, it might be thought that a middle ground can be found between (Comm-min) and (Comm-dem). Indeed, there are likely to be several middle ground positions which require more than (Comm-min) without requiring an exact match in inferential path. For example, one might hold that speakers don't intend an exact inferential path, but have a vague intention consistent with many different inferential paths. The problem with such views is that if the condition is too weak then we will be able to generate cases where the conditions are satisfied by luck. But if we demand much more than (Comm-min) then we will be demanding too much. Even a moderate strengthening of the condition will force us to conclude that understanding has failed in cases where it clearly succeeds. This is indicated by the following case presented by Richard Heck [2014]¹:

Some years ago, I was driving with my friend 'Steve' following a pleasant lunch out. About twenty minutes after we left the restaurant, Steve said, just 'out of the blue', "She was gorgeous". I knew immediately to whom he was referring: the hostess at the restaurant where we'd just had lunch, whom I shall call Sarah, and who looked as if she'd just arrived from a Vogue photo shoot. [Heck, 2014: 337]

This act of communication occurs with very little set-up. It is difficult to identify any specific *ib*-feature the speaker may intend, and if there is any such feature it is likely to be very minimal. It is hard to imagine the speaker having even a loose intention about the inferential path the audience should take. This suggests that a more demanding constraint than (Comm-min) will struggle to make the right prediction about this case.

¹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting Heck's cases. Similar cases are discussed by King [2014a, 2014b].

For example, suppose that we require that the speaker have a very loose intention not just about the relevant ib-feature, but also about the inferential path the audience must take. Suppose the intended ib-feature is simply that the sentence purports to refer to some female who could be thought of as salient. And suppose that Steve also has the very loose intention that the audience reach the correct referent via a positive association between a salient woman and the concept 'gorgeous'. Communicative success can occur even when this fairly minimal additional constraint fails. For, as Heck also points out, the audience may not associate the term 'gorgeous' with Sarah at all. Nonetheless, the audience may reason as follows: 'if Steve finds the potentially salient woman attractive then the woman he intends to refer to is, due to our differing tastes, probably someone I find unattractive, so I take him to be referring to Sarah'. This is not simply a minor deviation from the speaker's intended inferential path, it is quite a major deviation. Yet communicative success still occurs. If the speaker's intention were liberal enough to allow such inferential paths then we would once again be at risk of allowing for the intention to be satisfied by lucky assignment of the correct referent.

So, it seems that quite large deviations from the speaker's intended inferential path are consistent with successful understanding. This suggests that it will be very difficult to find a middle ground between (Comm-min) and (Comm-dem). Whether or not a deviation is acceptable or not appears to be a function of whether or not the deviation could easily have led the audience astray. That is, it depends on whether or not the audience's recovery of the intended proposition was a matter of luck. A satisfactory treatment of Loar cases will explain the source of the communicative luck. Buchanan's

proposal fails in this regard, as the conditions set out by (Comm-min) can be met consistently with the audience's recovery of the speaker's intended meaning merely being a matter of luck.

Whether or not the elimination of such luck will require audiences to entertain propositions with suitably related modes of presentation is still, at this stage, an open question. With that said, I am sceptical as to the prospects of using Loar cases to defend a robustly Fregean view. Both Loar and Buchanan's approaches involve postulating a factor in virtue of which agents must come to assign matching referents. Loar holds that referents must match in virtue of agents assigning the same sense to a term. Buchanan holds that referents must match in virtue of the audience attending to the speaker's intended *ib*-feature. I am sceptical as to whether any such account can work, as I suspect it will always be possible to construct a case in which the right referents are assigned, and the specified further conditions are met, but an element of luck intervenes. Rather, I am sympathetic to a pure anti-luck approach, similar to the anti-luck views of knowledge advocated by Pritchard [2005]². Factors such as co-assignment of senses, and joint attention to *ib*-features might explain how luck is eliminated in given cases. However, I am sceptical as to whether luck must (or will) be eliminated by the same factors in every case³.

References.

-
- 2 Pritchard [2005] argues that the lesson we should draw from Gettier cases is that knowledge is incompatible with certain kinds of luck. One's true belief that *p* counts as knowledge iff, given one's evidence, it is not a matter of luck that one's belief is true. This is explicated in terms of a safety condition on knowledge. One's belief is safe iff not easily could one's belief have been false (if formed via the same method).
 - 3 I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers and the editor (Professor Stephen Hetherington) for helpful comments.

- Bach, K., Harnish, R. 1979. *Linguistic Communication and Speech Acts*, Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press.
- Bezuidenhout, A. 1997. The Communication of De Re Thoughts, *Noûs* 31/2: 197-225.
- Buchanan, R. 2014. Reference, Understanding, and Communication, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 92/1: 55-70.
- Grice, P. 1969. Utterer's Meaning and Intention, *The Philosophical Review* 78/2: 147-77.
- Heck, R. 1995. The Sense of Communication, *Mind* 104/413: 79-106.
- Heck, R. 2002. Do Demonstratives have Senses?, *Philosopher's Imprint* 2/2: 1-33.
- Heck, E. 2014. Semantics and Context Dependence: Towards a Strawsonian Account, in *Metasemantics: New Essays on the Foundations of Meaning*, ed. A. Burgess and B. Sherman, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 327-65.
- King, J. 2014a. Speaker Intentions in Context, *Noûs* 48/2: 219-37.
- King, J. 2014b. A Metasemantics of Contextual Sensitivity, in *Metasemantics: New Essays on the Foundations of Meaning*, ed. A. Burgess and B. Sherman, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 97-119.
- Loar, B. 1976. The Semantics of Singular Terms, *Philosophical Studies* 30/6: 353-77.
- Paul M. P. 1999. *Success in Referential Communication*. Philosophical Studies Series Vol. 80, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Pritchard, D. 2005. *Epistemic Luck*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Récanati, F. 1993. *Direct Reference: From Language to Thought*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Récanati, F. 1995. Quasi-Singular Propositions: The Semantics of Belief Reports, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Vol* 69: 175–93.
- Schiffer, S. forthcoming. Aphonic Terms and the Deep Problem with Gricean Meaning,

in *Meanings and Other Things: Essays on Stephen Schiffer*, ed. G. Ostertag, Oxford:
Oxford University Press.