



Title	A classification of discursive references to settle what is modified by talking and why it is so
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Extended abstract of:

A classification of discursive references to settle what is modified by talking and why it is so.

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I have claimed (Narváez, 2018) that in order to build a dynamic model of sense/knowledge transformation, we need to reshape our notion of discursive reference. In this presentation, I will introduce a classification of discursive references or modes of aboutness. My aim is to offer a scalable tool to settle what can be modified by talking in communicative interactions, and why it is so.

Over forty years ago, the Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking explained how language came to matter to philosophy while the notion of knowledge was being transformed (Hacking, 1975, p. 186). Platonic ideas as perfect objects, or thoughts as a type of Cartesian substance, left room for statements and propositions. When statements were considered a suitable way of representing and expressing knowledge, their meanings –propositions– became the contents of justified true beliefs. In the analytical tradition, to speak about this transformation, the phrase linguistic turn, first popularised by Richard Rorty, is of common use.¹

However, the pioneering discussions that strengthened the relationship between language and knowledge took place in Vienna during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they had to do directly with meaning (*Bedeutung*) (Mulligan, 2012, p. 109 et seq.). The debate between those who, like Brentano, maintained the meaning of a word was the object named and those like Husserl, who rejected such a position, allowed Mauthner to state, ‘Philosophy is theory of knowledge and the theory of knowledge is critic of language’ (Mauthner, 1901). To be sure, this was the thematization that involved Frege, Wittgenstein² and Russell in their respective works, establishing the relationships between word-meaning-object.³

As intuitive as these relationships may seem,⁴ the truth is that the issue remains problematic despite the long and sophisticated discussion about them. The readjustments

¹ What Richard Rorty called linguistic philosophy was ‘the view that philosophical problems are problems that may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language or by understanding more about the language we presently use’ (Rorty, 1967, p. 3). Although it was Rorty who made popular the *linguistic turn* label, nowadays, the discussion about its history and scope is well alive. See Koopman (2007), Wagner (2010) and Hacker (2013). The latter paper includes an illustrative graphic about the linguistic turn history located as a gif image at the following:

http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199238842.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199238842-oxfordhb_9780199238842_graphic_018-full.gif.

² When Wittgenstein moves away from the criticism of language from Mauthner’s view, saying it explicitly in the *Tractatus* (4.0031), and accepts the criticism of language in the sense of Russell, he takes sides with a type of purification to distinguish the linguistic appearances of the logical form of the proposition. A presentation of the similarities and differences between Mauthner and Wittgenstein can be found in Santibáñez (2007).

³ The most common way of introducing the relationships (of correction, adequacy or truth) between symbols (words), thoughts and references (meanings) and referents (objects) is the semiotic triangle of Ogden and Richards (1923).

⁴ Probably, the relationship between word-meaning-object is familiar to us from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (1916). However, the famous significant-signifier pair is not at all equivalent to the pair word-meaning. In Saussure’s linguistic treatment, words are an inseparable union of significant-signifier. The significant was conceived as an acoustic image of the word and the signifier as the concept that the sign expresses. This is important because the semantic relations that are contemplated are made arbitrary when associated with an acoustic image or signify a certain concept or meaning but not when it comes to the association of a meaning to a word. Put in a different way, to be a word is not to be an acoustic or graphic image.

between conceptions of language and epistemological positions seem to have no end. Under certain conditions, we can say that the meaning of words determines what we are talking about, but what we talk about seems to determine the meaning of the words.

In philosophical treatments of language to refer to something is to relate linguistic representations with what they represent.⁵ This relationship is influenced by the model of the proper name⁶ in which a word refers to an individual entity, and under this influence, the idea that words are names that represent and bring into the discourse⁷ more or less complex entities (objects, properties, situations, states of affairs, processes, events, classes and so forth) keeps exercising a strong influence. The sentences in which (and by which) something about those entities is predicated are then considered their descriptions. Of course, many other functions of language are admitted in addition to the descriptive one, but independently of the speech act enacted, the truth is that the very same way of referring is presupposed. Regardless of the purposes for and the ways of using language, the semantic value (*Bedeutung*) of the terms and phrases that refer⁸ is the entity brought into the discourse, that is, its referent. In this model, naming, referring and representing are closely related semantic relationships. The (logical) name is used to represent a referent, so a part of the problem in the philosophy of language has to do with how to disentangle this relationship.⁹

In this presentation borrowing to some degree the structure of Horwick's argumentation (Horwick, 1990, 1998) about a minimalist conception of truth – as within the realm of deflationists theories – “to refer to” becomes a transparent element but not a redundant one¹⁰. The role of the binary predicate ‘... refers to...’ is expressive and inferential. Asserting that a statement – sentence, or speech – refers to something is to take it as a statement – sentence or speech. To carry out this project, as I said, a classification for discursive references will be advanced. This classification covers discursive references or modes of aboutness, not types of referents seen as a function of whatsoever modes of existence. As such, it has to be a useful and scalable *tool to talk about what we talk about* in any communicative interaction.

The main criterion used here to discriminate discursive references is given by the predicate ‘...is expressible’ and its negation ‘...is not expressible’.¹¹ Being expressible is a constitutive feature of some discursive references. The relationship stated in an assertion between a discursive reference and the predicate ‘...is expressible’ is definitional and not attributive, and here, internal is preferred. By opposition, the same happens with non-

⁵ A full development of those debates can be seen in Reimer and Michaelson (2016).

⁶ (Donnellan, 1966, 1970)

⁷ From a lexical etiology perspective, to have a name is not a condition that can be referred to. The detection of patterns, their recurrence and the interactions with them can give a name in an efficient manner to manage information.

⁸ The identity of the semantic content requires referents being the semantic value of referring expressions. However, note that the phrase ‘semantic value’ coined by Miller (1998, 2007, pp. 7, 9, 340) to clarify the Fregean notion *Bedeutung* is used to justify that the same semantic content can be asserted, ordered and asked. So far in the text, we have seen that *Bedeutung* is understood in some cases as meaning, in others as reference and eventually as semantic value hesitating from being a concept to being an object.

⁹ A paradigmatic case is the treatment of fictions in the philosophy of language; see García-Carpintero and Martí (2014). The title of this collection of works is empty representations trying to highlight a problem. Because proper names in the logical sense serve ‘[...] to pick out an object, to bring it into our talk or thought, to call our attention to it for further representational purposes such as saying something about it, asking about it or giving directions concerning it’ how can it be explained as representational and referential functions in front of non-existent objects?

¹⁰ See also McDonald 2011 for a minimalist approach of properties and facts.

¹¹ There is no impediment assuming that our criterion is the presence or absence of a property: the property of being expressible. In any case, the relationship between predicates and properties functions in parallel to the relationship between references and referent.

expressible discursive references. In order to keep this explication in the domain of discourse and contrary to what happened within the framework of the linguistic turn, we will not move from language to epistemological and ontological spheres. In any case, the main implications will turn to be epistemological and ontological.

When referring is already considered a (semantic) relation establishing a connection between language and reality (Robertson, 2012, p. 189; Martí, 2012, p. 106), it becomes impossible to avoid the usual recalcitrant dualities classifying references – referents actually – using some fundamental ontological or epistemological criteria. As soon as referents – extra-linguistic realities to which we refer to – come into play, we stop classifying discursive references, and start to classify reality according to several modes of existence, hence, we take an ontological perspective.¹² Then, as far as those referents cannot ontologically be material, physical, empirical, factual or whatever the sustained ontological naturalized commitment advocates for, they are postulated, by exclusion, to be immaterial, spiritual, abstract or ideal provided that those types of reality are accepted; otherwise, they are eliminated as inexistent or reduced to existent ones. I submit that the other way around is possible: if what we refer to can be said (narrated, explained, etc.), then it is expressible;¹³ otherwise, we are talking about language independent realities – of a variety of types and scales to be discussed. Because the predicate used here to classify discursive references points to the verbal ability of expressing by language, the assumptions made about expressibility are shared among the speakers of the linguistic community. Consequently, our semantic interpretation of *reference* – namely our accepted semantic substitute¹⁴ for it – will be ‘what we talk (it talks) about’ and what we talk about is expressible or non-expressible.

When what we talk (it talks) about is fully expressible: a norm, an idea, a concept, a story, our way of representing it is linguistic¹⁵ and our way of experiencing it is cognitive and emotional, which is where its motivational power emerges. This power can be understood as exhibiting top-down causation (Ellis, 2016). When what we talk (it talks) about is non-expressible: a cell, a hurricane, a bike, our way of representing it can be linguistic, using criteria which encapsulates some natural or conventional description of that extension (entity, pattern, process). Our way of experiencing it, besides being, to some extent, cognitive and emotional, is physical too when actualised at certain scale. These references have an impact, affecting our bodies physically in a biological manner or aided by technology.¹⁶

Only to the extent to which a discursive reference is non-expressible does it make sense to treat it as extra-linguistic and to assume ontological and epistemic naturalised commitments.¹⁷ However, to the extent to which a discursive reference is expressible, its

¹² What an ontological perspective is before the linguistic turn has nothing to do with the Quinean demand of ontological commitment.

¹³ Following Terrence W. Deacon’s (2013) proposal in *Incomplete Nature*, expressible references are ententional, and the central feature of ententional phenomena is to produce a limitation or constraint, being absences ‘are intrinsically incomplete in the sense of being in relationship to, constituted by, or organized to achieve something non-intrinsic’ (p. 549).

¹⁴ The concept of semantic interpretation here follows the Wittgensteinian one (1953 PI §201; 1958: 63; 1967: PG §229, 41e; 1974 Z:§9) and is something that is given in signs, substitutes one expression for another or adds a new symbol to an old one.

¹⁵ When Wittgenstein points out the problem of ostensive definitions is recognizing that *having a name* is already a move into a language game.

¹⁶ To deal with problems of existence and actualisation, the concept of scale, introduced later on in the presentation, will play a key role.

¹⁷ According to Price’s terminology, it can be said that objective naturalism has a place in a subjective naturalistic project.

naturalisation will have a more limited scope.¹⁸ There is an internal relationship between sharing a language and converging on whether what is talked about is or is not expressible. Any question as to why a reference is expressible points to a constitutive feature of it: norms, principles, ideas and concepts are expressible; otherwise, they would not be norms, principles, ideas or concepts. Although we represent and name norms, principles, ideas and concepts, only non-expressible references can be described in spite of the traditional considerations of philosophy of language.

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¹⁸ It is worth mentioning Terrence W. Deacon's work again because the naturalised understanding of ententional phenomena is something difficult to achieve because his research shows us an emergentist explanation of mind and meaning. Here, we do not deal with the nature of a concept, a norm or a story precisely because the only feature of expressible references we are interested in is their expressible character.