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## Referential Zero Point

**Abstract:** Perhaps the most important controversy in which ordinary language philosophy was involved is that of definite descriptions, presenting referential act as a community-involving communication-intention endeavor, thereby opposing the direct acquaintance-based and logical proper names inspired reference aimed at securing truth conditions of referential expression. The problem of reference is that of obtaining access to the matters in the world. This access may be forthcoming through the senses, or through descriptions. A review of how the problem of reference is handled shows though that one main practice is to indulge in relations of acquaintance supporting logical proper names, demonstratives, indexicals and causal or historical chains. This testifies that the problem of reference involves the zero point, and with it phenomenology of intentionality. Communication-intention is but one dimension of rich phenomenology that constitutes an agent's experiential space, his experiential world. Zero point is another constitutive aspect of phenomenology involved in the referential relation. Realizing that the problem of reference is phenomenology based opens a new perspective upon the contribution of analytical philosophy in this area, reconciling it with continental approach, and demonstrating variations of the impossibility related to the real. Chromatic illumination from the cognitive background empowers the referential act, in the best tradition of ordinary language philosophy.

**Keywords:** reference, zero point, ordinary language philosophy, phenomenology, the real as impossible, chromatic illumination

### Definite descriptions controversy

*Perhaps the most important controversy in which ordinary language philosophy is involved is that of definite descriptions, presenting the referential act as a community-involving communication-intention endeavor, thereby opposing the direct acquaintance based and logical proper names inspired reference aimed at securing truth conditions of referential expression.*

Ordinary language philosophy promotes, as its name indicates, the virtues of language such as speakers use it, in opposition to the trials to assess language by means of logical calculus. The project of *mastering* language has its roots in Leibnizian tradition. The problem that was tackled was that of disambiguating language. A background metaphor that was used was that of the blossoming tree of science (Raymond Lullus), as opposed to noxious weeds in one's garden that are better rooted out. The mastering was supposed to succeed through rational calculus, and through alphabetical encyclopedic ordering of the abundant material, so that one would obtain the needed oversight. Frege continued this tradition, proposing the calculus of conceptually ordered writing (*Begriffsschrift*), which according to him, would dispose of ambiguities. The calculus that he first wrote consisted of clearly delineated paths of reasoning upon a two-dimensional surface, on a page. Reasoning has a start, marked by a sign of |- . Right after | (indicating assertive force of the ensuing trail), what is now known as quantifier is inserted upon the line - telling us whether the ensuing reasoning will be existential or universal (such an indication may appear further on in complex cases). After this, propositional variables such as *p*, *q*, *r* appear upon the line of reasoning. Joining quantifiers and propositions results in predicate calculus, different though from what Frege considered to be wrongful language form infested subject-predicate schemas of reasoning in the Aristotelian tradition. Frege's project now forms the basis of an abundance of logical calculi. Similarly as Lullus and Leibniz, Frege proposed an *artificial language*, such as it is appropriate for *science*, which better eliminates ambiguities. So Frege is not against the richness of everyday and poetic language; rather, he aims to expel it from scientific endeavors, as he explicitly says. Regardless, Frege established the language of logical calculus that forms the basis of several philosophical projects. One of these is that of Bertrand Russell's theory of descriptions (*On Denoting* 1905), which exercised an undisputed position as a guide for analytic philosophy for nearly half a century, until the appearance of P. F. Strawson's paper *On Referring* (1950). At that moment what is now known as the *controversy of definite descriptions* entered the scene. What was the controversy about? Russell's take was in the tradition of disambiguating language, which according to him obfuscates logical commitments under misleading grammatical forms. So his wager concerned the precise logical calculus rendering of ordinary language. Strawson, on the other hand, argued that language is foremost a tool of communication, in which people's aim is not to deliver logically impeccable messages. Rather, by talking to each other people use linguistic expressions, such as names and predicates, as something not unlike tokens, in order to pragmatically make known their intentions, by engaging in presuppositions such as these in conversation. For Russell, mentioning a person such as the present king of France should be clear as to the exact logically supported commitment. For Strawson on the other hand, communication-intention is in the foreground. (Was the one mentioning the king trying to entertain me, or perhaps to bore me?) In this manner, Strawson was a part of a tradition that put stressed not the descriptive but upon the *performative* function of language. *How to Do Things With*

*Words* is the title of Austin's book in which he stressed just this, namely that language is something that exercises its effect upon people as they enter into the social setting. Normative pragmatic preconditions of success for one's communication-intention are studied. Russell tried to base his logical analysis of linguistic strings such as sentences upon securing what he called logical proper names, via epistemic direct acquaintance. Strawson on the other hand rather targeted a referential act as a community-involving communication-intention endeavor. Whereas Russell insisted to provide clearly delineated truth conditions (either truth or falsity) to each sentence, Strawson allowed for *neither truth nor falsity* of these expressions in some disputed cases. So much for a quick introduction of the *definite descriptions controversy*. The *problem of reference* was its central point at which we will take a brief look now. Notice that Strawson's ordinary language approach did put truth conditions determining in the second plan, while this was a *sine qua non* for Russell's project. Tarski's project provided truth conditions as basis for artificial languages. Only later Davidson tried to use his proposals for what he called natural language.

### Problem of reference

*The problem of reference is that of obtaining access to the matters in the world. This access may be forthcoming through the senses, or through descriptions.*

The *problem of reference* was at the center of the controversy involving definite descriptions. At least this is the case for the approach of *On Denoting*. Russell actually attempts to refute philosophical ways to allow for the existence of non-existent or even impossible objects. Meinong in his so-called theory of objects namely subscribed to Brentano's intentionality thesis, according to which in each thought something is thought about, and in each desire something is desired. Other people, such as Husserl, thought that intentional relation is directed at *content*, whereas Meinong held it that we have to do with *objects*. And these objects for him exist, in a kind of platonic realm; but they are real indeed. Russell smelled confusion here which he proposed to solve by *tracing* the mentioned *entities in the objective material world*. If it turns out that there is no such entity in the world, the expression containing it will be *false*, and otherwise it will be true. As a key case, Russell proposed the following sentence:

(K). The actual king of France is bald.

Following its grammatical form, (K) implies that there now exists a king of France, and that he is bald. The analysis (A) that Russell proposes of (K) reveals three constituents of the sentence:

(A). (a) There exists an actual king of France, and (b) There exists exactly one such king (as it is indicated by the word "the", making the phrase a definite description), and (c) This king is bald.

Now Russell proposes to examine the world. Once we do our search, we discover that there is no such entity there now. This refutes the first conjunct (a) of (A). And of course with this (b) is dismissed as well, as is the predicate involving conjunct (c). It is actually sufficient to realize that the conjunct (a) of (A) is *false*, and so we can attribute a *determinate truth value* of falsity to (A) in its entirety. Analysis (A) has revealed that misleading reference to the actual king of France as suggested by the grammatical form of (K) needs to be established through a verification of whether the referred entity actually exists in the world.

This is what Russell tries to solidify through his further move, which actually comes down to finding a support for truth of definite descriptions in what he calls *logical proper name* (as we already mentioned). Logical proper name is an *epistemic* path that leads through our empirical matter gathering senses towards the searched-for reality in the world. The above-described relation is referred to by Russell as one of *acquaintance*. It is a *direct* epistemic relation to the world indeed, which actually gets rid of descriptions (all in trying to logically support them). This relation of *acquaintance* succeeds for Russell in a *direct contact* with the world, so that the *linguistic richness gets reduced*, to a relation of a *demonstrative*. The demonstrative (“this”, in the case if one would find in the world the entity searched for in the analysis such as (A) and point to it) does away with the additional grammatical form. “The king of France”, “an important monarch” and several other descriptions would be just as ready to confuse logical commitments for grammatical ones. In fact, a *demonstrative* such as “This!” as one points at the entity that one finds in the world is a *logical proper name*, without any possibly confusing linguistic baggage.

I have singled out this curiosity in Russell’s dealing with language (definite descriptions) up to the point to dismiss linguistic form via *demonstratives* involving direct relation to the world via acquaintance. What I propose now is to examine the problem of reference as it was forthcoming later *from the point of view of the one engaging in referential relation*. The relation of *acquaintance* namely involves the *direct point of view* of the one engaging in it, his or her *phenomenology* and *zero point* going along with it. If this is the case – as I will argue – then the problem of reference is not so much an objective relation to the external world, but rather phenomenological zero point perspective of the one involved in *acquaintance* and search for logical proper name along this path, in a curious ‘trial’ to be master of language. Demonstrative, indexical and other matters that appear in the discussions involving the problem of reference show that this one should be promoted as a *zero point* phenomenological endeavor. The reason people did not notice this obvious matter is that they adhered to the presupposition that *reference* is something objective in the world. Reference is an encounter with the world indeed, but an encounter of *impossibility*. Descriptions or Fregean senses are dismissed in profit of the *subjective phenomenological zero point* as the real referential engagement. Reference is still an encounter with the world, as finding something *relevant* in it, along the quality of what may be called *beautiful pattern*.

## Indexical treatments of reference

*A review of how the problem of reference is handled shows that one main practice is to indulge in relations of acquaintance supporting logical proper names, demonstratives, indexicals and causal or historical chains.*

In the following, my aim is to present a brief overview of the problem of reference, such as it appears in analytic traditions of philosophy of language. This overview will spotlight only the most important points. The final accent in addressing the problem of reference will be upon the zero point, the perspective of the one performing the referential act. This path may be made easier by the fact that the overview I rely upon is by an author who stresses the importance of subjective view and phenomenology of intentionality, Colin McGinn.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it is an objective presentation of the area. As stated, my attention will focus on the salient points only. Frege started the tradition with the distinction between sense and reference, dealing with singular terms first and then extending the exercise to secondary cases. Kripke went with names as rigid designators, with causal chains supporting them. Yet this support as well involves direct relation of the baptism providing practice in the actual world. Rigid designation and causal chains thus originate in a primary relation involving the referential act. We already mentioned Russell's acquaintance supporting logical proper names in the trial to straighten up definite descriptions according to the language disambiguation project. Donnellan distinguishes between referential and attributive uses, between denoting and referring acts, all in allowing for truth value gaps. Kaplan stressed the importance of demonstratives, indexicals, and of their contexts of use. Evans further developed an approach to demonstratives and indexicals, providing theory of sense and reference for indexicals. Putnam with his semantic externalism argued that meanings are not in the head, using Twin Earth thought experiments to underscore his point. In this, he stuck to the direct relation to what supports the referential act. Tarski's theory of truth again started with the relation of direct correspondence. Davidson tried to apply that approach to the *meaning* such as it appears in natural languages. Grice puts the stress upon speaker's meaning, as opposed to non-natural meaning which nevertheless somewhat sticks to the speaker-involving act of direct acquaintance.

These quick indications show that the problem of reference, along the whole tradition dealing with it, was handled by relations of acquaintance with the purported original situation of referential act. The speaker is involved here either in a direct manner, or through a causal or similar mechanisms, again showing the importance of his founding presence for referential relation.

Notice again that logical proper name comes to the fore through the relation of direct acquaintance featuring the speaker. Demonstratives involve a direct contact between the speaker and the reality that he points out, actually obfuscating any additional use of language. Indexicals are expressions which change the meaning with the

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<sup>1</sup> Colin McGinn, *Philosophy of Language: The Classics Explained*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2015.

context of their use. Causal and historical chains base their referential insurance through the sometimes mythically-presented relation of the speaker's original involvement.

## Zero point

*This testifies that problem of reference involves the zero point, and with it the phenomenology of intentionality.*

One of the strategies to secure referential relation introduces indexicals. Above we said that these are expressions that systematically change reference according to the circumstances in which they are announced. The indexical 'I' varies its reference in respect to its utterer: the I which I announce will have a different reference from the I that you utter. 'Here' again varies according to direct involvement of the agent into spatial circumstances, and 'now' changes its reference according to the moment of enunciation. Among these various forms of indexicals, people also distinguish the case of the *essential indexical*. Perry tells us about his chasing somebody he noticed leaving a trail of sugar in their path at the local supermarket. After turning around the line of stacks he then discovers that the person making mess is actually *he himself*. Previously he was thinking about 'that person' in an objectivist perspective, but now he realizes that it is he himself who is concerned (*Tua res agitur.*). The third person point of view is quite different in its consequences for agency from the first person point of view. This may be illustrated by the example of you receiving the message that a bear in the woods is threatening a hiker. Your reaction will be quite more dramatic once you realize that the hiker in question is *you yourself*.

The essential indexical involves your own perspective, the zero point. Mach illustrated this by a picture presenting what he sees as he is seated in his reclining chair: the surrounding room and the equipment in it, his body, but not his eyes and face. This is because there, the eyes and face, is where the source of the visual perception is located. That's the zero point. Wittgenstein illustrates it with a sphere featuring a point at one of its corners, where the acquaintance with the world has its origin.

The very quick overview of trials to pinpoint the referential relation in the analytic philosophy of language has shown that it involves *zero point*, the essential indexical, once as things come to their basis. So referential relation in the trials to determine it reveals itself as the zero point matter. But now, zero point is a *phenomenological* matter: there is the what-it's-like qualitative feeling for you to operate from your zero point and there is a similar phenomenology for me as I engage in the world from my zero point perspective. The power of zero point *illuminates* the perspective, and this seems to be the key to determine what is involved in referential relation through these indexicals, demonstratives and historical or causal chains.

Along with referential zero point comes *phenomenology of intentionality* as a constitutive matter. Phenomenology determines intentionality and thereby the referential relation, narrowly forthcoming in one's experiential world.

## Dimensions of rich phenomenology

*Communication-intention is but one dimension of rich phenomenology that constitutes an agent's experiential space, his experiential world. Zero point is another constitutive aspect of phenomenology involved in the referential relation.*

Phenomenology is very rich indeed. It constitutes an agent's experiential space. Among those things it includes are conceptual direct involvements in perception. I do not merely perceive borders and shapes, but I perceive my keyboard. Similarly, I perceive people and cars. This is a kind of achievement indeed. Now, the community or social world is also part of my experiential space, actually of my experiential world. So we can examine the communication-intention project such as it is characteristic for the ordinary language philosophy approach to the referential act as just one additional dimension of phenomenology. And zero point, through its demonstratives, indexicals and the rest is another phenomenological dimension constituting the experiential world and thereby the referential relation.

## Phenomenology tackling the impossible

*Realizing that the problem of reference is phenomenology based opens a new perspective upon the contribution of analytical philosophy in this area, reconciling it with the continental approach, and demonstrating variations of the impossible related to the real.*

It is interesting that the *zero point reference* in its phenomenological constituency was not recognized. This seems to be the consequence of the fact that people adhered to the presupposition that the referential relation applies to an independently-existing world. This may be true indeed, but its way of reaching the world is phenomenologically constituted, and it succeeds through *beautiful patterns* providing the *relevance* in its encounter with the world. From this point of view, the problem of reference is *aesthetic*, keeping faith to the etymology of this expression.

As the problem of reference is one cornerstone of analytic philosophy, and now it reveals itself to be *phenomenologically* constituted, this opens the window of opportunity to reconcile the positions of so-called analytic and continental traditions in philosophy. Note that the problem of reference is linked to the impossibility of getting an independent, third-person point of view of the world. This is demonstrated by all the demonstratives, senses and indexicals involved in tackling it in the analytic tradition. There are variations of impossibility in our relation to the real. However, these impossibilities still have their aesthetic relevance.

## Chromatic illumination

*Chromatic illumination from the cognitive background empowers the referential act, in the best tradition of ordinary language philosophy.*

A very important point is that the referential act, through the *zero point reference* perspective, gets enabled through the existence of a *rich cognitive background*, existing in that experiential world.

In art, *illumination* is one of the basic matters. The point of illumination is that the sources providing the quality to the scene are mostly outside of that scene itself, and in this manner they effectively exercise their impact upon the presented whole. Such illumination can come from unexpected angles, such as the political allusions and circumstances that prompted that work of art to be fabricated, or from the intention to use the mentioned work of art with the intention of transforming society. A more everyday illustration of the *chromatic illumination* effect comes from the painting *Au Moulin Rouge* by Toulouse-Lautrec, which is displayed in the Art Institute of Chicago. In that picture, one can see people seated around a table in the Moulin Rouge bar, several sources of light outside the scene illuminating the depicted situation. One source of light illuminates the center of the table, being outside of it in a certain reddish nuance, directing attention to the group seated there. Another greenish source of light illuminates a woman's figure in the foreground, lower right corner of the picture. And there are *reflections of illumination* in the upper left corner of the painting, in the mirror wall. All these sources of illumination are not directly present in the scene, but they provide the quality to it from the outside.

Another example of chromatic illumination can be provided by the process of joke-getting. At the moment one gets the joke one is told, one does not laugh in an indeterminate manner. To the contrary, one grasps numerous dimensions involved in the joke setting in a single moment. This may be demonstrated by the questions one is able to answer as they are related to that setting. It turns out that all these concerns *chromatically illuminate* the hearer's understanding in that single moment and underpin their joke-getting.

Chromatic illumination is the way in which the sources that exercise their effect from outside the scene impinge upon that very scene, providing its relevant quality.

Notice that aesthetic impact from the painting and humorous getting of the joke demand one's participation. We react to the scene which is presented to us, and that we indulge in from our engaged zero point relevant beautiful patterns involving referential perspective.



**Miško Šuvaković:**  
**Addendum to Potrč's Interpretation of Zero Point**

The question is: how does the artistic practice relate to the external world?

The relation between the artistic practice and the world is not simple and univocal, it is different from the relation between everyday language and the world. Do we pass from Frege to early and, then, to later Wittgenstein? Frege's idea that the meaning of a statement is defined by the referent and the way the referent is prescribed to the statement in a possible world pays attention to "the way the statement is prescribed to the statement", and that means that the way of prescribing or performing is the one we need to pay attention to. In the next step we go to the use of words in language. Similarly, the artist does not paint a picture that possesses a referent, but he uses the picture in certain context of painting, art, culture and society, complicating its actual and possible meanings. A pianist performs Bach's *Fugue* again and again, changing the actual and potential context of performing and listening. Finally, Duchamp's ready-made, and the whole art made in the tradition of ready-made during the long 20<sup>th</sup> century, points to the fact that the referent is not an invariant condition of meaning, but that it is what modifies with the work on the change of referential relation. Remember neoclassical Hamlet, remember hippy Hamlet, remember neoliberal or self-governing Hamlet—all different uses of the same character with different functions.

The placing or appearance of an artwork in the world is certainly part of the world and material forms of production within the world which is not only creation but also the use and performance and, again and again, recontextualization. The artwork relates to the world not only through the referent, but also through the material structure of the work or communicative act – if I am not mistaken this is what Ecco called *aesthetic message*.

In other words, the relation between the world and the artwork is a relation between the functions and not between the referents. The romantic poet will not sing to Julia in a referential language, he will modify the way of giving the referent in accordance to the art style, cultural cliché, etc.

The story is further complicated by the fact that the artist is not a *zero platform* of the creative act, he is born, formed and realized in the middle of the speech acts and art appearances/languages, which are not the origin but a surrounding ecology of his being in the long history of modifications of giving the referential relation which has become more and more complex and non-transparent from the Renaissance to today. That non-transparency requires keys for individual cases of interpretation, as Morris Weitz insisted. Painting with a referent is not the same painting in the case of Dutch masters and Morandi's still lifes, but there exists a certain excess of expectation for which we must be prepared. Danto has clearly said that in order for an artwork to appear the world must be ready for it. That preparation leads us from the idealized world of immediate sensuality into the art world – a set of platforms, protocols, and procedures for giving the referential relations or the ways of use in performing the work and its reception.

The artwork (an object, event, situation) is not an object of the world towards which the mind is directed in its innocence of the first encounter. On the contrary, the artwork is an object set in the world (*ge-stell*) in order for the mind/body to be directed toward it in a complex way defined by the history of art, culture and society.

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