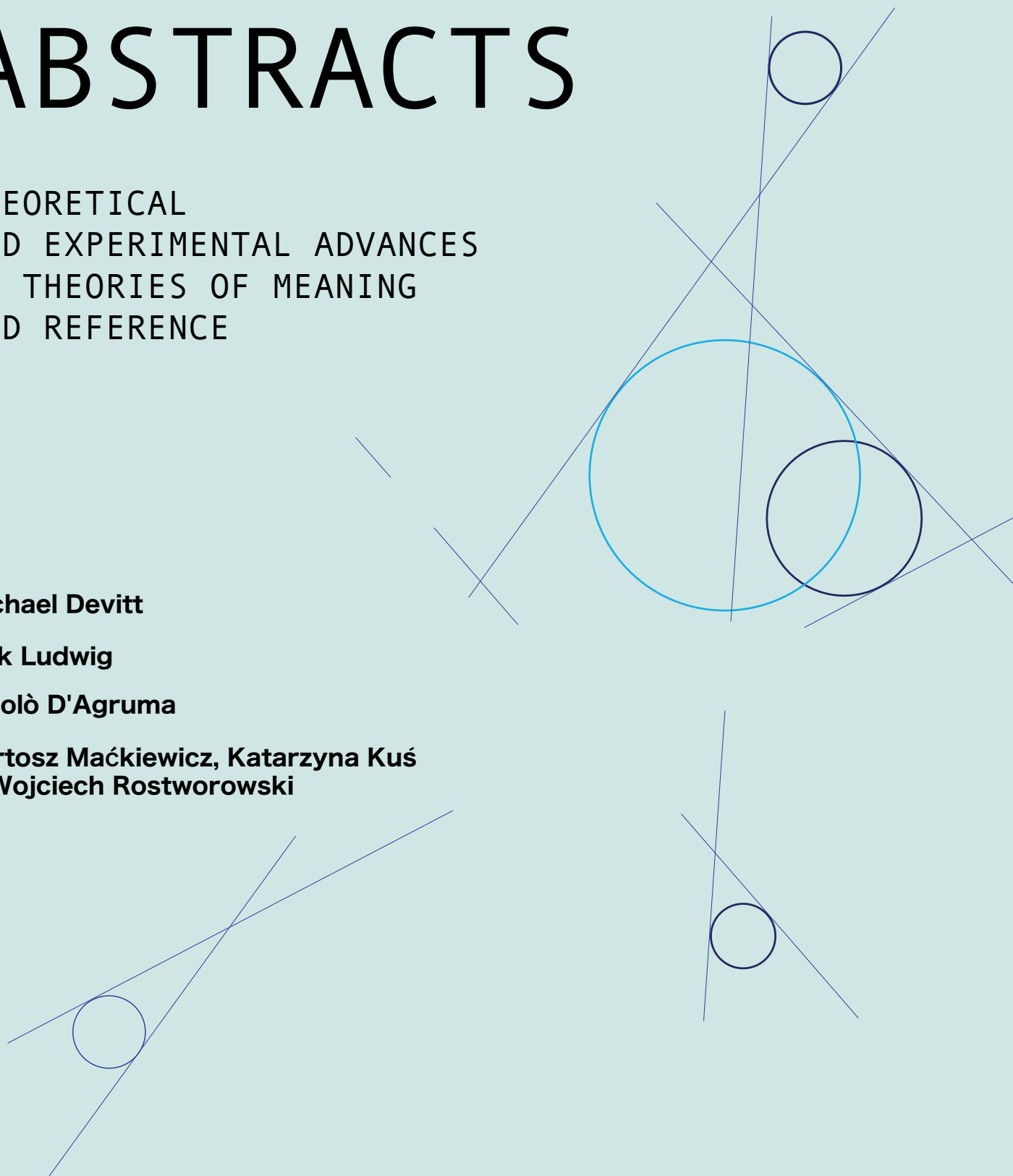# ABSTRACTS

THEORETICAL
AND EXPERIMENTAL ADVANCES
IN THEORIES OF MEANING
AND REFERENCE

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Reference Borrowing:
The Case Of Implement Terms

joint work with Brian Porter

Abstract

The paper will report on our recent experiments testing the theory of reference for implement terms, using 'abacus' and 'fax machine' as our examples. We found strong evidence that the reference of an implement term is not determined by the descriptions that participants associate with the term. We conclude that a "classical" description theory of these terms is false. So, we find support for the causal theory of reference borrowing, the central idea of the picture of reference presented by Kripke, Putnam, and other causal theorists in discussing proper names and "natural" kind terms. We emphasize that our findings do not support a causal theory of the initial reference fixing by the "experts" who introduce an implement term. Indeed, we think it highly plausible that reference is initially fixed by a description of the implement's function and defining physical characteristics. If so, then implement terms are covered by a hybrid theory of reference, causal borrowing and descriptive fixing.
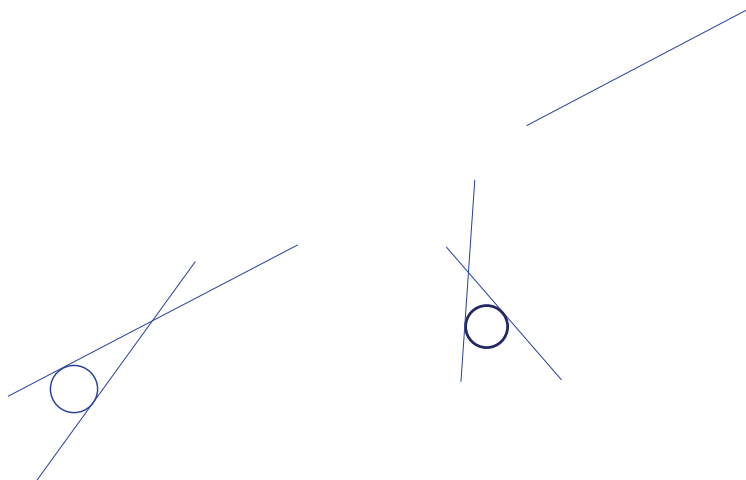
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Meaning, Truth, Communication and Convention

joint work with Marija Jankovic

Abstract

We review a problem for truth-theoretic semantics arising from the aim to provide a body of knowledge sufficient to understand a language without prior knowledge of another and tacit knowledge of translation relations between it and the target language. Next, we show that combining an idea that appears (only) in Davidson's 1970 Locke Lectures (Davidson 2020) with a collectivist account of communication, promises a way out of the circle of language within which we might otherwise seem to be caught. The idea drawn from Davidson's Locke Lectures is that the axioms of a truth theory can be understood to express conventions for the use of object language expressions. The idea drawn from the collectivist account of communication is that these conventions can be analyzed in terms we-intentions directed at joint action plans for communicative exchanges.

Davidson's project in was structured by two questions. (1) What we "could know that would enable us" to interpret another's speech? (2) How "we could come to know it" ((Davidson 2001a, p. 125)). A constraint is that the theory that satisfies the Knowledge Requirement [K].

[K]   Propositional knowledge of the theory suffices for understanding the utterance of any sentence of the object language.

Davidson notes that a translation manual fails to satisfy [K]. It states metalinguistic equivalences in meaning. You can know what it states (S1 in L1 translates S2 in L2) without being able to understand either language. It helps only if you understand one of the languages already.

We follow Lepore and Ludwig (2005) in understanding Davidson as aiming to answer the first question by appeal to constraints on an axiomatic truth theory sufficient for it to meet Convention T. This guarantees that the sentence giving truth conditions interprets the object language sentence for which it gives truth conditions. LL require the axioms to be interpretive. This suffices for the theory to meet Convention T and to show how primitive expressions contribute in virtue of meaning to sentential truth conditions.

As LL point out, what suffices for interpretation is knowledge about a truth theory, since the truth theory doesn't state that it satisfies Convention T. This requires treating the truth theory as a syntactic object. We need then to state what the axioms mean. However, this raises a problem akin to the problem with a translation theory. For the way a statement of the meaning of an axiom

        … means that p

Informs us of its meaning is by our understanding (in meta-metalanguage) 'p' and knowing it is the same in meaning as '…'. But this trades on the same thing that the usefulness of a translation theory does. Thus, we have not stated a body of knowledge sufficient to interpret any object language sentence (Author 2, 2017).

Next, we appeal to how Davidson motivates his project in the Locke Lectures.
The key idea is that "the question whether someone [has spoken the truth] on a particular occasion is wholly determined by systematic facts about the language that must be known to any who speaks or understands language" (p. 21); the systematic facts that anyone who learns the language knows its conventions. This then suggests the role of the truth theory is to express conventions for the contribution of expressions to the truth conditions of sentences containing them. We express this explicitly by prefacing the theory's axioms with the operator 'It is a convention of L that' (i.e., it must be learned to learn the language). We call this a truth-convention theory.

We argue for two claims.

(1) A truth-convention theory states a body of knowledge sufficient to understand any sentence in the object language.
(2) Contrary to what Davidson came to think, this illuminates linguistic meaning by appeal to a concept that has a broader reach than just language, namely, the concept of convention.

We establish the second by appeal to an account of core communication as a joint activity involving speaker and hearer (Jankovic, 2014). We sketch an account of the basic collective action plan for communication that shows how to ground meaning in we-intentions that can be understood independently.

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Reference and Proper Names: A Clash Between Eye-Tracking and Truth-Value Judgments

joint work with Filippo Domaneschi, Massimiliano Vignolo, and Camilo Rodríguez Ronderos

Abstract

Machery, Mallon, Nichols and Stich (MMNS, 2004) tested laypeople's referential intuitions in a scenario modeled on Kripke's Gödel Case. MMNS found a cross-cultural and an intra-cultural variation in participants' referential intuitions on proper names. Martí criticized MMNS's study. Referential intuitions reveal participants' meta-linguistic leanings rather than their dispositions to use proper names. Our study tests linguistic usage by collecting eye-tracking data in a visual-word paradigm. Two conclusions are drawn. First, eye-tracking data corroborate the causal-historical theory. Second, contrary to what is widely accepted in the literature, truth-value judgments are not reliable tests of linguistic usage.

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(Non)Descriptive Reference of Descriptions: Evidence from Eye-tracking

Abstract

According to the received view, a definite description determines its semantic value in the world (an object) in virtue of its descriptive content. That is, a description 'the F' designates / denotes etc. x iff x uniquely satisfies 'F' (Russell 1905, Neale 1990, Bach 2004, Elbourne 2013, among others). However, this view is problematic in light of the phenomena of referential uses and 'incomplete' descriptions such as 'the table', 'the dog', etc. It seems that descriptions can function similarly to demonstratives, in particular, complex demonstratives of the form 'this/that F'. Based on such considerations, some theorists have argued that the semantic value of a description – at least, in a referential use – is partly determined by some factors other than satisfying the description, for instance, broadly-construed salience (Lewis 1979), or a causal-perceptual link (Devitt 1981, 2004). The defenders of the unique-satisfaction view usually claim that those factors have only pragmatic relevance, in particular, are related to the 'speaker's referent' and not the 'semantic referent' (e.g., Kripke 1977, Neale 1990, Bach 2004).

We present an empirical study that investigates whether and how the non-descriptive factors contribute to fixing the referent of a description by language users. Our study uses the
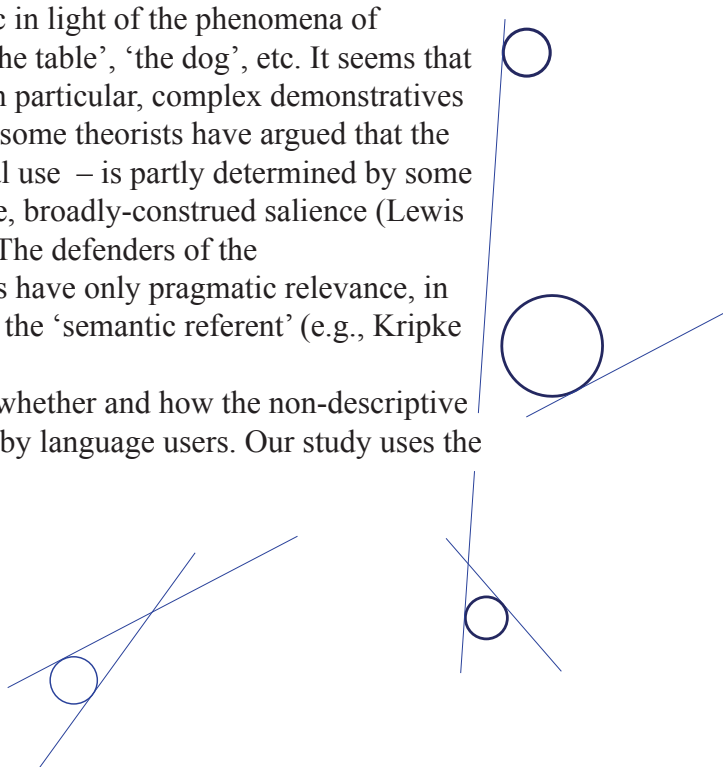
eye-tracking method with a visual world-paradigm (following a similar study by Bosch et al. 2011). Apart from the 'unique satisfaction', we have tested three conditions that are potentially relevant to reference identification: (i) previous mentioning, (ii) visual and (iii) conversational salience. Our study was conducted with Polish speakers and focused on Polish equivalents of definite descriptions in their referential use, as well as complex demonstratives. In the experiment, we employed both offline (selecting the object in the scene) and online eye-tracking (proportion of looks) measures to establish which of the two competitor objects is taken to be the semantic value of the target referring expression (description vs complex demonstrative) and how quickly its reference was fixed relative to its occurrence in a conversation.

Our results have confirmed three claims: (1) all three non-descriptive factors are effective for people's determination of the referent; (2) the reference identification with non-descriptive factors is equally fast as in the unique-satisfaction condition; (3) the reference identification in the case of using a description is equally fast as with the use of the corresponding complex demonstrative. These results suggest that the alternative approaches to the semantics of descriptions are on a right track and the reference relation of referentially used descriptions involves non-purely descriptive mechanisms, similar to the ones of complex demonstratives.

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