

**George Powell**

*Language, Thought and Reference.*

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The study of the relations between language, thought and reference has always constituted the center of the philosophy of language. Not surprisingly, the number of publications devoted to these issues is legion, and it might seem that hardly anything new can be proposed; however, interdisciplinary studies often offer promising results. The novelty of Powell's approach lies in combining research from three different fields: philosophy of language, linguistic pragmatics and (though only to limited extent) cognitive science.

The book is composed of seven chapters (including the introduction and conclusion), tackling the following issues: proper names, indexicals, definite descriptions, and complex demonstratives. The list of references and an index conclude the book.

The short introductory chapter provides necessary historical background to the discussion of reference (especially Mill's and Frege's approaches, and their more recent continuations). Powell very briefly presents Fregean semantics. He observes that Frege's conception of reference and arguments, and their later more sophisticated versions, have had 'a profound and lasting effect on the philosophy of language: they have located truth squarely at the centre of theories of linguistic meaning' (2). Against this background Powell forms his research questions, and puts forward the central claim of his philosophy of reference, namely, that 'we should oust truth from the central place it has held in those theories of meaning that have held sway for the last century' (3). According to the author, truth in these investigations should be replaced with mind, and this move should help recognize the role that 'mind plays in mediating between language and the world' (3). This move is consistent with the more recent 'cognitive turn' in philosophy of language (advocated by, among others, John Searle), which sees many of the questions of language as special cases of questions about the mind. At the same time Powell is consistently interested in the semantics and pragmatics of a certain class of linguistic expressions, rather than logical formulas.

Chapter 2 lays out in more detail the theoretical background, and reassesses the relations between semantic, pragmatic and cognitive facts concerning singular expressions. Powell makes extensive use of the relevance-theoretic framework: he contrasts relevance-theoretic pragmatics and semantics, and proposes to move away from minimal semantics and truth-based positions. Further in the chapter Powell distinguishes between the speaker's informative intention and the derivational intention (akin to communicative intention in Relevance Theory). He also presupposes a representationalist view of mind, i.e. he considers the contents of propositional attitudes to be representations in a form of language of thought; and he argues that an appropriate

analysis of the semantics and pragmatics of singular expressions should be able to account not only for truth-conditional intuitions, but for contradictory intuitions as well.

Chapter 3 focuses on proper names and Powell starts with an examination of the semantics and pragmatics of proper nouns. His three research questions are concerned with the contribution of singular expressions to the truth conditions of the utterances in which they appear, their contribution to the cognitive significance of such utterances, and with the conditions for understanding singular expressions. The position Powell advocates entails ‘that there are no linguistically referential expressions, that is to say, no expressions which are constrained to refer by their linguistic meaning’ (32). Furthermore, it is not necessary to give proper names ‘a referential semantics in order to explain their predominantly referential use’ (80). Powell discusses the central data on proper names (co-reference, emptiness, rigidity), compares his approach with other current accounts (such as neo-descriptivism, neo-Millianism), and demonstrates that his account can handle both referential and non-referential uses of proper names with the same theoretical machinery. In the approach he favors, a proper noun is not constrained to refer to the actual bearer of the proper noun in the context of utterance, but refers ‘rather to the optimally relevant individual appropriately linked to the information *x is the bearer of PN*’ (96).

Chapter 4 is devoted to another class of singular expressions, indexicals, especially syntactically simple indexicals such as ‘I’, ‘today’, and ‘here’, and simple demonstratives such as ‘this’ and ‘that’. Complex demonstratives (such as ‘this cat’, ‘that moose’) are discussed in Chapter 6. Powell once again focuses on the by now familiar issues of linguistic meaning, truth-conditional contribution, cognitive significance, the contribution and conditions for understanding, and context-dependence of indexicals, ‘the ability of certain expressions to give rise to different interpretations in different contexts’ (101). He compares the approach advocated throughout the book with accounts which stress the logical properties of indexicals, and once again points to his interest in natural language expressions. According to Powell, ‘indexicals are marked as individual concept communicators by their linguistic meaning, and..., with the exception of “I”, the elements of descriptive meaning which they encode play a pragmatic role in interpretation’ (145).

In Chapter 5 Powell turns from referential expressions to definite descriptions—canonically, any NP (noun phrase) of the form ‘the F’—and he starts by investigating the differences (introduced already by Keith Donnellan) between referential and attributive uses of descriptions, providing an overview of the debate on descriptions (including the views of Paul Grice, Saul Kripke, Stephen Neale, and others). Different theories point to contradictory claims: that definite descriptions are univocal, and that the referential attributive distinction is truth-conditional (161). Later in this chapter Powell shows that the relevance-theoretic framework offers a possibility of reconciling these two claims.

As already observed, in Chapter 6 the discussion moves on to complex demonstratives (expressions of the form ‘that/this F’). For truth-conditional semantics these constructions pose some difficulty: they are closely linked to simple demonstratives, ‘standardly taken to be the prototypical referring expressions’, while on

the other hand they also ‘display the kind of syntactic complexity associated with definite descriptions’ (175). Powell discusses the relevant issues connected with referentialism and quantificationalism of these expressions, and he offers an analysis in terms of Relevance Theory, claiming that ‘complex demonstratives are communicative tools designed for a particular purpose, that purpose being to talk about particular members of the nominal class’ (192). In other words, they are ‘marked by their encoded meaning as individual concept communicators’ (196).

Finally, Chapter 7 offers a short conclusion, summary of findings and offers a few suggestions about the possible implications of Powell’s account for theories of natural language meaning. He once again stresses the important claim that singular expressions are tools for communicating individual concepts, from which it follows that ‘the interpretation of singular expressions is constrained to concepts which are taken to denote individuals’ (206), and that ‘whereas lexical meaning is sensitive to the distinction between individual and other concepts, the truth-conditions of thought are sensitive to distinctions within the class of individual concepts, distinctions to which linguistic meaning is blind’ (209).

Powell moves in his approach from analyzing meaning in terms of relations between language and the world, to analyzing relations between language and mental representations (mappings from language to mind); furthermore, he focuses on interpretation of utterances, and hence performance rather than competence. His project of deposing truth and placing mind instead at the center of meaning is an ambitious and challenging idea, and it would be very interesting to see its further applications.

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