

## REFERENCE, DISCOURSE AND PLENTITUDE

When talking about the things surrounding us, there is a strong intuitive pull to say that communication about a given object is successful only if we are talking about the *same* thing (otherwise we are talking past each other). It is natural to capture this intuition by saying that

UNIQUENESS: If a speaker asserts a sentence containing a referential expression  $E$ , communication was successful only if both the speaker and the hearer associate the same referent with  $E$ .

On the other hand, referential expressions seem to be affected by vagueness. A popular view about how vagueness affects reference is best brought out by a quote from David Lewis. As he puts it, regarding the expression ‘outback’, it is not the case

... that there’s this thing, the outback, with imprecise borders, rather there are many things, with different borders, and nobody has been fool enough to try to enforce a choice of one of them as the official referent of the word ‘outback’ (Lewis, 2001, p. 212)

If you buy into this picture, there are no vague objects which could feature as possible referents, all there is are many precise and equally viable candidate referents. Similar examples can be given with respect to referential expressions used to talk about mountains, clouds, works of art etc. If you agree with this picture, you should accept,

PLENTITUDE: For many referential expressions (at many occasions of use), there is a plentitude of equally viable candidate referents.

The goal of my paper will be to investigate the question of whether, given PLENTITUDE, we can hold on to UNIQUENESS when modelling discourse and communication. My point of departure will be Stalnaker’s classical model (s. his [Stalnaker, 1999](#)). I will first explore a view according to which we may hold on to PLENTITUDE, UNIQUENESS as well as Stalnaker’s framework and rely on certain meta semantic theories to fix the referents for the referential expressions used in a conversation. I am going to reject this approach by presenting arguments (building on [McGee, 1997](#)) to the effect that, given PLENTITUDE, non of the meta semantic theories I will consider are plausible on their own. I will then go on and explore two approaches which hold on to PLENTITUDE as well as Stalnaker’s framework, one (inspired by [Barker, 2002](#)) which rejects and one (inspired by [Heim, 1982](#)) which accepts UNIQUENESS. Even though, at this moment, I do not have a knock down argument which will help us decide on the question of which one of the views is correct, I will present an argument which seems to tip the balance in favor of the latter view.

## References

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