

1 

Referring expressions, Predicates, Universe of Discourse, Deixis, and Definiteness

2 

Referring expressions

- REFERRING EXPRESSION- any expression used in an utterance to refer to something or someone (used with a particular referent in mind)

Fred in 'Fred hit me', but not in 'There's no Fred at this address'.

- Indefinite noun phrases can be referring expressions, depending on the context: *a man* in 'A man came looking for you', but not in 'A man has to watch his back'. ambiguous cases-resolved by the use of *certain* following the indefinite article.
- Definite noun phrases (proper names, personal pronouns, longer descriptive expressions) are most frequently used as referring expressions, but not always (the *Fred* example)

3 

- OPAQUE CONTEXT- part of a sentence which could be made into a complete sentence by adding a referring expression, but where the addition of different referring expressions, even though they refer to the same thing or person, will result in sentences with different meanings. O. contexts usually involve verbs such as *want, think, believe, wonder about*.

Laura Bush thinks that...is a genius- opaque context resolved by adding e.g. *President* or the *Leader of the Republican Party*. If Laura erroneously believes that the President is not the Leader of the Republican Party, then the sentences have different meanings.

4 

- EQUATIVE SENTENCE- used to assert the identity of the referents of two referring expressions, i.e. to assert that two referring expressions have the same referent. Equative sentences can be false.

Barack Obama is the President of the United States.

George W. Bush is the President of the United States.

5 

Predicates

- 2 major semantic roles of simple declarative sentences' subparts: role of argument(s) (played by referring expression(s)) and role of predicator
- Despite some overlap, semantic analysis of a sentence into predicator and argument(s) ≠ grammatical analysis into subject and predicate.
- PREDICATOR of a simple declarative sentence is the word or group of words which does not belong to any of the referring expressions and which, of the remainder, makes the most specific contribution to the meaning of the sentence. It describes the state or process in which the referring expressions are involved.
genius in *Einstein was a genius*, *in* in *Cairo is in Africa* are predicators
- Nouns, (main) verbs, adjectives and prepositions can function as predicators, but conjunctions and articles cannot

6 

- PREDICATE- any word or sequence of words which (in a given single sense) can function as the predicator of a sentence
- 'sequence of words'- *wait for, in front of*
- 'in a given single sense'- bank1, bank2- two different predicates
- predicate vs. predicators- predicate identifies elements in the language independently of particular example sentences; predicator identifies the semantic role played by a particular word or words in a particular sentence.
A tall, handsome stranger entered the saloon – *enter* the only predicator, at the same time predicate along with *tall, handsome, stranger, room* which can function as

predicators in other sentences (*He is tall, He is handsome, He is a stranger, That building is a saloon*)

7 

- DEGREE of the predicate is a number indicating the number of arguments it is normally understood to have in simple sentences
asleep is a predicate of degree one (one-place predicate)
love is a predicate of degree two (two-place predicate)
give is a predicate of degree three (three-place predicate)
- The majority of adjectives are one-place predicates (*John is tall*), except for adjectives which require prepositions (*Cars are different from bikes*) and are two-place predicates.
- The majority of nouns are one-place predicates (*John is a teacher*), except for a few 'inherently relational' nouns: *father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister, neighbour, etc.* which are two-place predicates (*John is the brother of the current President*).

8 

Referring expressions vs. Predicates

- Distinction between referring expressions and predicates- absolute. An expression is used in a given utterance either to refer to some entity in the world or it is not used in such a way.
- Proper names are always used as referring expressions and verbs and prepositions as predicates. Indefinite noun phrases can be used as both.
- Predicates do not refer, but can be used when contained in the meaning of a referring expression to identify the referent of that expression
predicates of *in the corner* – *in* and *corner*. These predicates help to identify the referent of the referring expression *the man who is in the corner*.

9 

Universe of Discourse

- GENERIC SENTENCE- sentence in which some statement is made about a whole unrestricted class of individuals, as opposed to any particular individual. They can be introduced by either *a* or *the* (or neither).
Man is mortal, but not *That man is mortal*.
- UNIVERSE OF DISCOURSE- (defined for any utterance as) the particular world, real or imaginary, that the speaker assumes he is talking about at the time although not accepted by all semanticists, any expression that can be used to refer to an entity in the real world or in any imaginary world can be thought of as a referring expression (*unicorn, God*)
interlocutors need to have the same u. of discourse if communication is to be successful

10 

- Even though expressions such as *two hundred, the national anthem, two o'clock* do not indicate physical objects, we may call them referring expressions. They do not refer to a physical entity, but to a particular number, particular song, particular time, etc.

11 

Deixis and Definiteness

- DEIXIS (Greek 'pointing')- occurrence of deictic words
- DEICTIC WORD- word which takes some element of its meaning from the context or situation (speaker, addressee, time, place) of the utterance (e.g. personal pronouns, demonstratives, adverbs of time and place, some predicates like *come*- 'toward the speaker').
- Besides deictic words, there are in English and other languages grammatical devices- tenses which are also regarded deictic because past, present, and future times are defined by reference to the time of the utterance: *My sister wrote you a letter.* (my sister wrote the letter before the time of my utterance)
- In reported speech, deictic terms occurring in the original utterance may be translated into other, possibly non-deictic, terms in order to preserve the original reference.

12 

- DEFINITENESS- a feature of a noun phrase selected by a speaker to convey his assumption that the hearer will be able to identify the referent of the noun phrase,

usually because it is the only thing of its kind in the context of the utterance, or because it is unique in the universe of discourse (*this/the book, the Earth*).

- However, the use of e.g. definite articles does not guarantee semantic definiteness: *The whale is a mammal* vs. *The whale just bit off my friend's leg!*