Kjell Johan Sæbø (University of Oslo)

Lessons from descriptive indexicals

There are two theories of so-called de re readings of definite descriptions in modal contexts. On one theory, the description is evaluated at the actual world. This theory, call it Theory 1, is favoured by semanticists. On the other theory, the description is replaced by another description which is evaluated at the possible worlds. This theory, call it Theory 2, is favoured by philosophers. There is little tension between the two theories, because they rarely meet. And in many cases, predictions all but coincide.

Indexicals are a class of referential terms where worlds of evaluation are not supposed to matter, and yet, even they seem able to have two different readings in modal contexts, the ordinary reading and a "descriptive" reading. Interestingly, the ordinary reading corresponds to a de re reading on Theory 1 while the descriptive reading corresponds to a de re reading on Theory 2. The parallel carries over to proper names and, still more interestingly, to definite descriptions themselves, which can in certain circumstances be seen to have three readings, one de re under Theory 1, one de re under Theory 2 (really a de dicto reading of a substituted individual concept) and one (ordinary) de dicto. These are circumstances where the predictions of Theory 1 and 2 come apart after all, and sometimes, those of Theory 1 are so implausible that the reading cannot be taken seriously.

I will argue then that we need the theory of de re where the term is replaced by another which is then read de dicto. In other words, the theory favoured by philosophers cannot be disregarded. Noone has yet given a compositional version of it, though, so if time permits I will look into what such a version would look like. If time also permits, I will ask whether the theory favoured by semanticists can be disregarded, and answer that Theory 2 can do almost, but not quite, all that Theory 1 can.