

ON THE MEANINGFULNESS OF SELF-REFERRING SENTENCES

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Abstract

The paper in the first place aims to clarify the concept of self-referring sentence through a revision of the standard account; in the second place it deals with the meaningfulness of the self-referring sentence ‘What I am hereby asserting is true’; in the third place it discusses the advantages and limits of the Rylean namely-rider approach to the problem of self-referring sentences.

Keywords: Philosophical logic, Self-reference, Sentence, Meaning, Gilbert Ryle

1. The concept of self-referring sentence

In order to start to clarify the object of inquiry, at least a few distinctions are needed. Let us consider the following three cases.

First case. An English teacher writes on a black-board: [1] “This sentence is written in English”.

Second case. Some children are playing a game in which everyone must describe, crying aloud, what is doing. The first child, while running, cries: “I am running!”; the second one, while riding a bike, cries: “I am riding a bike!”; the third one cries: [2] “I am uttering this cry!”.

Third case. A professor of philosophy of language says: [3] “What I am hereby asserting is true”.

The sentences [1], [2] and [3] perhaps would be commonly interpreted as examples of self-reference, but the question is worth to be investigated further. The term ‘self-reference’ may suggest that the linguistic expression (or, as some philosophers say, the reference bearer) and the referent are the very same. In reality, things are not properly like that. As I want to show, it never happens that the subject

(linguistic expression) and object (referent) of the act of reference coincide. There is never, properly speaking, a self-reference. We can only speak of self-referring sentences in a broad sense.

In philosophy of language, the distinction between sentence, proposition and utterance is widely diffused even if not univocally understood. I do not naïvely aim to define here such interrelated concepts; therefore, I confine myself to adopting the idea that (i) a *sentence* consists of a well-shaped sequence of words; (ii) a *proposition* consists of the semantic content expressed by a sentence; (iii) the *utterance* is the act by which a sentence is uttered.

In the case [1] ‘This sentence is written in English’, the linguistic expression (or reference bearer) is the noun-phrase ‘This sentence’ and the referent is the entire sentence ‘This sentence is written in English’. The subject and the object of the act of reference do not coincide.

In the case [2] ‘I am uttering this cry!’ the linguistic expression is the noun-phrase ‘this cry’ and the referent is the cry itself, i.e. the utterance of the sentence ‘I am uttering this cry!’. The subject and the object of the act of reference do not coincide.

In the case [3] ‘What I am hereby asserting is true’, the linguistic expression is the definite description ‘What I am hereby asserting’ and the referent is the proposition expressed by the sentence ‘What I am hereby asserting is true’. The subject and the object of the act of reference do not coincide.

As said before, we can give only a definition of a self-referring sentence *lato sensu*: a sentence *s* is in a broad sense self-referring when a part of the sentence *s* refers either to the sentence *s* or to the proposition expressed by the sentence *s* itself or to the act of utterance of the sentence *s* itself. Therefore, we can distinguish between three types of self-referring sentences in a broad sense.

In the sentence [1] ‘This sentence is written in English’ the referent is a sentence. I label “self-reference at a syntactic level” (in a broad sense) every case of self-reference in which the referent is a sentence.

In the sentence [2] ‘I am uttering this cry!’, the referent is an utterance. I label “self-reference at a pragmatic level” (in a broad sense) every case of self-reference in which the referent is an utterance.

In the sentence [3] ‘What I am hereby asserting is true’, the referent is a proposition. I label “self-reference at a semantic level” (in a broad sense) every case of self-reference in which the referent is a proposition.

2. Is the sentence ‘What I am hereby asserting is true’ meaningful?

While the sentences like [1] or [2] are clearly meaningful, the question of the meaningfulness of self-referring sentences at a semantic level like [3] has been widely investigated. Has the definite description “What I am hereby asserting” a referent? I will start examining the theses of a few philosophers who have analysed the general problem of self-referring sentences in the central decades of the 20th century.

Karl Popper has considered a different example of self-referring sentence at a semantic level:

[4] What I am now saying is meaningful

He holds, through a *reduction ad absurdum* argument, that the sentence [4] is true and, therefore, meaningful.

Even direct self-reference may be perfectly in order. In fact, many examples of non-paradoxical although directly self-referring assertions have been known for a long time [...].¹ I assume for the purpose of the *reductio* the truth of the negation of your theorem [the sentence “What I am now saying is meaningful”]: “What I am now saying is meaningless”. If this assertion is true, it must be, clearly, meaningful. Thus the assumption that it is true is absurd; which proves your theorem.²

¹ Popper distinguishes between “direct self-reference” and “indirect self-reference”. An example of direct self-reference is ‘What I am now saying is meaningful’; an example of indirect self-reference found by Popper is the following famous dialogue:

Theaetetus. Now listen to me attentively, Socrates, for what I shall put before you is not a little tricky.

Socrates. I promise to do my best, Theaetetus, as long as you spare me the details of your achievements in the theory of numbers, and speak in a language which I, an ordinary man, can understand.

Theaetetus. The very next question which I am going to ask you is an extraordinary one, although expressed in perfect ordinary language.

Socrates. There is no need to warn me: I am all ears.

Theaetetus. What did I say between your last two interruptions, Socrates?”

² Popper, *Self-Reference and Meaning in Ordinary Language*, 1954, p. 165.

I believe that Popper's argument contains a *petitio principii* (or question begging) and therefore is not sufficient to prove the thesis of the meaningfulness of [4].³ In order to decide if a sentence is true or false, one must already assume that it is meaningful, but such meaningfulness is what needs to be proved.

For every sequence of words, in the descriptive language, there are three possible cases: (i) the sequence of words constitutes a sentence expressing a false proposition; (ii) the sequence of words constitutes a sentence expressing a true proposition; (iii) the sequence of words does not constitute a sentence expressing a proposition.

Let us go back to the expression [5] 'What I am now saying is meaningless'. On the one hand, if the expression is meaningful, therefore the expressed proposition is false. On the other hand, if it is meaningless, therefore the expressed proposition is neither true nor false. (And we could not affirm that, since the expression would correctly declare its meaninglessness, then it would be true; in fact, it would not declare anything, since it is meaningless). It is still under discussion whether the expression 'What I am now saying is meaningless' falls into the case (ii) or the case (iii).⁴

Moreover, I think that Popper's sentences [4] and [5] are so difficult not only because they are self-referring, but also – and more relevantly - because the type of referent of the definite description 'What I am now saying' is not clear. Is it a *proposition* or a *sentence*? For, if the referent of the definite description 'What I am now saying' is a *sentence*, then there is no difficulty at all: the referent is the entire sentence in which it occurs. On the contrary, if the referent of the definite description 'What I am now saying' is a *proposition*, as Popper's argument does not seem to exclude, then the difficulty arises. Finally, can 'meaningful' be a predicate of propositions? Or would it be a case of category-mistake?⁵

³ On the difference between *petitio principii* and logical fallacy see Geach, *Reason and Argument*, 1976, p. 18: "There are only two possible ways of casting doubts upon an argument: to challenge the assertion of the premises, or to dispute whether the conclusion follows from them. Sometimes people try to object an argument on a third ground: that the conclusion is 'already implicit' in the premise. Bad logic books list 'begging the question' as a fallacy. If the conclusion really is implicit in the premises, then the argument is logically good as can be".

⁴ Ross, *On Self-Reference and a Puzzle in Constitutional Law*, 1969, p.13, rejects Popper's argument: "However, this "proof" is nothing but a vicious circle. By ascribing hypothetical truth-values to the dispute sentence it is already assumed that the sentence has meaning – which is exactly what should be proved".

⁵ On the idea of category-mistake see Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 1949.

3. Is the namely-rider test sufficient?

A few years before Popper, Gilbert Ryle in *Heterologicality* proposed a test for the meaningfulness of linguistic expressions, the namely-rider test. Let us consider a person who affirms: [6] “My hometown is on the sea”. According to Ryle, the expression ‘My hometown’ is meaningful if only if it is possible in principle to produce another sentence with a namely-rider, as [7] “My hometown, namely Venice, is on the sea”. A definite description or a noun-phrase has a referent if and only if, in principle, there is an alternative way to refer to the object (through a namely-rider). Ryle applies the namely rider test to the following sentence:

[8] The current statement is false

When we say “The current statement is false”, we are pretending either that no namely-rider is to be asked for or that the namely rider is “... namely that the present statement is false”. If no namely-rider is to be asked for, then “The current statement” does not refer to any statement. [...] If, alternatively, it is pretended that there is indeed the namely-rider, if unpacked, our pretended assertion would run “The current statement (namely, that the current statement (namely, that the current statement (namely, that the current statement...))”

No statement of which we can even ask whether it is true or false is ever adduced.⁶

The definite description ‘The current statement’ occurring in [8] cannot establish a referent. Alf Ross, with regard to self-referring sentences, proposed in 1969 an analogous test:

⁶ Gilbert Ryle, *Heterologicality*, 1951, pp. 67-68. On deontic version of Epimenides paradox see Conte, *Ricerca d'un paradosso deontico*, 1974.

It seems to me an obviously legitimate claim that if a description contains a referring phrase, this phrase must be replaceable by the object to which it refers if the description is to have any meaning at all.⁷

Also the example of meaningless self-referring sentence given by Ross is the liar paradox:

If we try to transcribe the sentence “This proposition is false” [...], we lose ourselves in an infinite regress [...]. In a first attempt we would get this transcription:

“This proposition (that is, the proposition ‘This proposition is false’) is false”.

[...] Because the transcription itself contains a referring phrase, a new transcription of this transcription is required, and so on *ad infinitum*: one is never told what proposition is subject to the qualification of being false.⁸

However, the namely-rider test can be applied also to other cases, like [3] ‘What I am hereby asserting is true’, which has also been called the case of the “truth-teller”. Even applying Ryle’s argument to the truth-teller, the transcription would go to an infinite regression: ‘What I am hereby asserting (namely, that what I am hereby asserting (namely, that what I am hereby asserting (namely, that what I am hereby asserting....)’

However, it seems to me that something in the namely-rider test is not sufficiently clear. In fact, one may object that of course even in cases [3] and [8] it is possible to give a namely-rider: for case [8] you could say: “The current statement, namely the statement that I am asserting a false statement, is false”. For case [3] you could say: “What I am hereby asserting, namely that what I am hereby asserting is true, is true”. And as some authors have said, these namely-riders are grammatically correct.⁹

⁷ Alf Ross (1969), pp. 8-9. As one can notice, while Ryle’s test requires the substitution with a namely-rider (i.e. with an alternative linguistic expression), Ross’ test requires the substitution with the object itself.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ On this question see Cargile, *Paradoxes. A Study in Form and Predication*, 1979.

I believe we still need a criterion (or better, a conception of reference) in order to determine what namely-riders are acceptable (is it acceptable, as a namely-rider, a definite description? is it acceptable a namely-rider referring to a non-existing object? is it acceptable a namely-rider referring to a fictional object? etc.). The namely-rider test alone does not solve the problem of meaningfulness, but it seems to sidestep it or to postpone it to a more radical problem.

A contribution to the search of this criterion can be found in Wojciech Żelaniec's inquiry.¹⁰ He has noticed that the "truth-teller", which he calls "the Veridic", is meaningless because it does not really express any thought:

Now, my reason to believe that neither the Liar nor the Veridic have a truth-value is the view that while they are well-formed (from the grammatical point of view, at least, as far as grammarians,' not philosophers,' grammar is concerned) they do not express any thought.

Clearly, the concept of expressing a thought is non-technical and not easy—perhaps fortunately so—to capture in any rigorous philosophical terminology, despite Plato's and Aristotle's *διάνοια*, Stoics' *λέκτα*, Bolzano's *Sätze an sich*, Frege's *Gedanken*, Russell's propositions. In terms of the now classical distinction between thought objects and thought contents (German *Inhalt*). I must explain that in denying the property of thought-expressing to the Liar and the Veridic I mean the latter *and thereby* also the former: that is, these sentences have no thought-content and thereby no thought object, either.¹¹

However, one might reply, we can understand at least something of the Veridic: we understand that the Veridic concerns the content expressed by the speaker and its truth-value. Why is this not

¹⁰ See also Gross/Tebben/Williams (eds.), *Meaning Without Representation. Essays on Truth, Expression, Normativity and Naturalism*, 2015

¹¹ Żelaniec, *Truth-Value and Self-Reference. Against the Spectre of the 'Revenge Liar'*, 2013, pp. 60-61.

sufficient? Why should we adopt a so highly normative or demanding concept of thought?¹² I think that in order to answer these questions, Ludwig Wittgenstein's thesis is still helpful: "4.024 *Einen Satz verstehen, heißt, wissen was der Fall ist, wenn er wahr ist.* [To understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true]"¹³.

A descriptive sentence is meaningful if and only if it is possible to establish its truth-conditions, i.e. the condition in which things stand when the sentence is true. For [3] and [8] it is impossible to imagine how things must stand in order to verify the sentence. Therefore, I agree that [3] and [8] can reasonably said to be meaningless.

At this point, I think we must extend our analysis to cases not involving properties that play a particular role in philosophical discussion, like 'meaningful', 'meaningless', 'false', 'true'. Consider the following examples of self-reference at a semantic level:

[9] What I am hereby affirming is not important

[10] What I am hereby affirming is innovative

Also for [9] and [10] it is impossible to imagine how things must stand in order to verify the sentence. We encounter this impossibility for every sentence *s* in which there is a linguistic expression that refers to the proposition expressed by the sentence *s* itself.

¹² This possible objection is somehow analogous to the one raised by Paul Feyerabend against the main stream theory of knowledge.

¹³ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922, § 4.024. Obviously, according to the terminology adopted in the present paper, we would say: "To understand a *sentence* means to know what is the case if it is true". Wittgenstein continues: "*Man kann ihn also verstehen, ohne zu wissen, ob er wahr ist.*" A general and credible criterion of meaningfulness, valid not only for descriptive sentences but also for prescriptive sentences, was formulated by Scarpelli, *Contributo alla semantica del linguaggio normativo*, 1985, pp. 96-97. On this Wittgensteinian viewpoint and the problem of verification, see Raimo, *La filosofia del linguaggio di Moritz Schlick. Immagine, uso e verificaione*, 2013, pp. 72-84.

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