Some arguments against non referential semantics

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One of the most important topics in philosophy of language is the status of linguistic meaning. According to Carnap semantics is the part of semiotics that deals with the relation between a sign and an object. In this sense semantics is referential by definition. In this paper I conceive semantics in a traditional way – as a theory of meaning of natural language. Nevertheless both approaches to semantics are not contradictory. Many theories treat meanings as reified objects, e.g. Fregean senses or Carnapian intensions. The aim of the paper is to present selected arguments against referential semantics of natural language. The arguments are supposed to support the claim that referential semantics are incapable to give an adequate account of natural language as a whole (though they can give a reasonable account of some parts of it). In particular they cannot neither constitute the basis of, nether play role of adequate theories of meaning.

The begging of referential semantics can be traced to Aristotle, who entrusted the sign a double role referring to objects and referring to their „pictures in the soul” (*Hermeneutics*). Referential semantics were built by empiricist point of view (Locke, Mill, verificationism), and from the Platonist point of view as well(Frege and his followers, e.g. Montague). The causal theory of reference of Kripke has also some traits of referential semantics. The main feature of referential semantics is usually a tacit supposition that the reference relation, i.e. the relation between expressions of natural language and objects, makes these expressions meaningful. Most referential semantics reified the meanings, e.g. Aristotelian mental beings or Fregean ideal objects.

There are various arguments against referential semantics. The ontological arguments focus on unacceptable commitments of the theories (in particular in case of fiction). Another group of philosophical arguments is directed against the classical concept of truth that constitutes the basis for most referential semantics, e.g. Quine's critique of protocol sentences in *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* is directed against verificationist theory of meaning. Many arguments against referential semantics were given by Donald Davidson. The argument from learnability is based on an obvious fact that every competent language speaker is capable of achieving disposition to understand infinite number of sentences in a finite time. Analyzing some semantic theories Davidson argues that whatever they describe they do not describe any learnable language. In consequence these semantics are not adequate for natural language. The *Third Man Argument* shows that even if we know the reference (or reified meaning) of words we cannot grasp the reference (or reified meaning) of a complex expression. Very controversial *Slingshot Argument* shows that sentences cannot have referents (or reified meanings) as thoughts, facts, situations and events.

The first step towards non-referential semantics was the theory of description of Bertrand Russell who indicated that the existence of the reference of the subject of a sentence is not a condition necessary of its meaningfulness. The first non-referential semantics was Kasimir Ajdukiewicz's directival theory of meaning, though Ajdukiewicz did not manage to avoid some rests of referential semantics in so called „empirical directives of meaning". In spite of this Ajdukiewicz's theory anticipates some later views of Wittgenstein and Quine, and some modern theories, e.g. *Conceptual Role Semantics*. Another example of non-referential semantics is Quine's theory of meaning in terms of translation manual. Some version of this theory is Donald Davidson's theory of

interpretation, which can be considered as an attempt to build the semantic program for natural language. Davidson's theory is holistic, recursive, and extensional, with the concept of truth as a unique semantic concept (though the concept of truth cannot be interpreted as a correspondence).

There is one common-sense but rather superficial argument against non-referential semantics. The basis function of natural language is a descriptive one. Referential semantics correspond with this function and non-referential semantics do not explain it. The argument is based on a misunderstanding noticed by Ajdukiewicz, Quine, and explained in full details by Davidson. The relation between an object and an expression is not a semantic one – it is a causal relation of an epistemological nature.