

The planned research concerns the semantics of singular terms, i.e. proper names, indexicals, and definite descriptions. The main objective of the project is the formulation of a theory of singular terms which encompasses all of the kinds of systematic uses of those expressions. Existing accounts of singular terms have either focused solely on their most typical uses or additionally on an ad hoc selection of non-typical uses. An example of a non-typical but still quite common and systematic use of an indexical is employing an animate pronoun to refer to a person depicted in a photograph, while pointing at the photograph (“She looks happy”). In the present project, all systematic kinds of uses of indexicals and definite descriptions will be investigated and a polysemous account will be considered as a possible analysis of those uses. The part concerning proper names will be based on a preliminary account but will be reconsidered in the broader context of all systematic uses of singular terms.

The project can be summarized by the following research questions:

Q1: What is the adequate characterization and typology of different kinds of systematic uses of indexicals?

Q2: What is the adequate characterization and typology of different kinds of systematic uses of definite descriptions?

Q3: Does the typology of systematic uses of proper names, which is the result of preliminary research, require revision in the context of systematic uses of other singular terms?

Q4: Do systematic uses of indexicals exhibit features characteristic for systematic polysemy?

Q5: Do systematic uses of definite descriptions exhibit features characteristic for systematic polysemy?

Q6: How to account for all systematic uses of indexicals?

Q7: How to account for all systematic uses of definite descriptions?

Q8: Are extant conceptions of systematic polysemy (including semantic and pragmatic conceptions) adequate for accounting for systematic uses of all singular terms?

Q9: Is it possible to apply the generalized conception of polysemy previously proposed for the analysis of systematic uses of proper names to the analysis of systematic uses of indexicals and definite descriptions, and would this be beneficial for the analyses of those expressions?

Q10: Can the generalized conception of polysemy provide a uniform semantics for singular terms?

Natural language is one of the fundamental tools of human cognition. In turn, singular terms, by being indispensable in connecting language with particular objects in the external world as well as with mental particulars, are those whose study contributes directly to a better understanding of cognitive processes. Singular terms (with the exception of definite descriptions) are usually considered only in their referential roles. Recognizing the non-referential uses of those expressions and their diverse contributions to content - both singular and general - may allow for a better understanding of the cognitive processes connected with non-descriptive knowledge of the world and explaining the connections between the descriptive and non-descriptive aspects of cognition.