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TROUBLES WITH THE SUBJECT

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Linguistic Problems

Distinguishing the subject and the predicate in a sentence is considered to be one of the basic operations in language analysis. However, what is characteristic is the fact that the examples considered in this context are usually limited to the most elementary utterances: in linguistic works these are usually sentences composed of a *verbum finitum* and a noun ("A dog barks"), in logical works sentences composed of a simple predicate and a proper noun ("Socrates is clever").

This situation is not accidental, since it turns out that analysis of utterances composed of three or more components encounters considerable difficulties, and the adopted criteria of distinguishing the subject and the predicate become quite ambiguous.

And thus the most popular distinction in linguistics is: the item described in the sentence — what is said about this item in the sentence.¹ Let us take a simple sentence with the object of the following type: *John loves Mary*. We may interpret it in at least four different ways: 1) in this sentence we speak of a John who loves Mary, 2) in this sentence we speak of Mary that she is loved by John, 3) in this sentence we speak of John and Mary and that the former loves the latter, 4) in the sentence we speak of a love relationship between John and Mary. It does not seem that any of these interpretations is more adequate than the others. Linguistics assumes that

¹ Everyone has come across this distinction over the course of their school education. It is also introduced in most of academic handbooks, e.g. Gałkina-Fedoruk 1957; Klemensiewicz 1961; Kopečný 1958.

the decisive factor in such cases is the formal properties of the expressions, i.e. the semantic subject of the sentence, the expression indicating the item which is described, is the expression being the syntactic subject (i.e. e.g. for inflection languages the noun or another word used in its place, appearing in the nominative and in agreement with the *verbum finitum*). According to the above, the proper interpretation would only be the interpretation in 1).

This traditional standpoint is encumbered with many ambiguities and errors. Above all, there is no deeper justification for the thesis that what is said in this sentence is exactly the same as has been indicated with the use of the syntactical subject. From the fact that "John" in the sentence *John loves Mary* has such and such morphological and syntactical properties, does not follow that this sentence is "more" or "only" about John, and not about Mary or about John and Mary at the same time. One may think that the source of the discussed view is the fact that one is suggested by simple sentences like *John is a teacher* or *John sleeps*. Since we are inclined rather to connect the notion of the "item" with a particular person rather than a class, it is kind of natural, that we split such sentences into two components, one of which refers to a certain item and the second ascribes to such items a certain attribute, i.e. something that is said about this item. Moving on to the analysis of sentences with objects, it is implicitly assumed, that identical or similar semantic relations between the components of the utterance correspond to identical or similar structures, and therefore, in particular, that an expression being the syntactic subject has also the same semantic role in any and all sentences. Such an approach to common language is naive and has often been undermined by the attempts to distinguish between the "surface", a purely external structure of the sentence, and its "deep" structure, constituting the basis for semantic interpretation, which stretch from Port-Royal Grammar up to the contemporary works of Chomsky and his followers. It is, after all, difficult to maintain consequently that e.g. in the sentence *John loves Mary* one speaks of John, whereby in the sentence *Mary is loved by John* one speaks of Mary, and then to explain the equivalence of these types of sentences or to convincingly explain what the difference between them consists of. As Reichenbach (1967) observed, traditional grammar, by assuming a strict division of sentences into two components is unable to acknowledge such phenomena as conversational or symmetrical predicates. The standpoint that the syntactic subject in the sentence has always the semantic function consisting of a reference to the item, which is described, is a mechanical simplification of the case. The role of the word "John" in the sentence *John is a teacher* is different from the role of this word in the sentence *John loves*

Mary, and both are different from the role of the word "John" in the sentence *John nags me*. In the first case John is included into a certain class, in the second — there is a certain relation described between John and Mary (and it is not clear, why in such cases one should be describing one person only), and finally in the third case — the speaker presents his attitude towards John's behaviour (and it is equally justified to assume that it is not John but the speaker that is being spoken of).

The idea connecting the subject of the sentence with the indication of the item described, would require a closer explanation of the expression "to speak of," as well as a justification of the thesis, that in each sentence it is possible to speak of one item only. In the present condition this idea does not provide the tools for a clear analysis of sentences other than one composed of two components. It would also be necessary to impose certain, not necessarily extremely nominalistic, limitations on the term "item," since if "an item" is both what the word "John" refers to in the sentence *John woke Mary*, as well as what the word "knocking" refers to in the sentence *Knocking woke Mary*, than the semantics of the common language is either bound to fall into a vicious circle ("an item" is what in a typical case the subject of the sentence pertains to, and the subject is the expression referring to the item which is described in the sentence) or, in case of no censorship between items and actions, to accept that in sentences such as *John knocks* there are simply two items: John and knocking.

The difficulties connected with sentences with three or more components have made the linguist adopt a more complex definition of the subject: a subject is an expression referring either to a carrier of an action (in the case of sentences with objects) or to the author of the action (Travniček 1951; Klemensiewicz 1962; Patree 1965). Also this standpoint may be argued to present an oversimplified view on the facts which we speak of in common language utterances. Not everything that is presented with the use of verbs is possible to be reduced to the scheme of actions (it was already noticed by Whorf that the notion of authorship is an expression of anthropocentrism characteristic for the western civilisation) (Whorf 1956).

Let us for example consider the following set of sentences:

John hit Peter.

John hates Peter.

John saw Peter.

John scared Peter.

John avoids Peter.

Only in the first case it is admissible to distinguish between the author

and the action. It is not an "action" to hate, to see, to scare or to avoid, although the transitivity of the relevant verbs might suggest that they are aimed at reporting something which belongs to the same category as hitting, giving something, taking something away, etc. Moreover, hating someone is naturally something more active than suddenly seeing somebody, scaring somebody is not directly caused by a given person, but rather by their particular behaviour, and avoiding somebody does not consist in "doing something," but rather in refraining from doing something, etc. Bending the relations between the syntactic object and the verb towards the opposition of the author of an act and the act, is made difficult, rather than impossible, by the semantic description of common language, all the more that in the case of verbs referring to authentic acts the notion of authorship brings many doubts. Are we dealing with authorship where the initiator of the act is an item capable of moving on its own? If yes, then the sentence *a stone broke the window* is a subject-less sentence, and in the sentence *John broke the window with a stone*, one should distinguish the subject "John." But if John constructed an automated device for breaking windows in the neighbour's house, then would it be John who was the author of the action, or the self-moving machine he invented? Further, if consciousness is a condition for the authorship of actions, then the forces of nature should be denied it. Let us take a dog biting a thief, what if the dog was set by its master?

Another standpoint present in linguistics which is relatively less popular, ties together the following opposition: subject — predicate with the opposition datum — novum.² Namely, most of the sentences appear in a specific word and situational context. Therefore, there are two elements in the sentence: one referring to the item known to the recipient of the widely understood context, and the other one providing new, hitherto unknown information about that item. The subject understood in such a manner is not always identical to the syntactic subject of the sentence — word order, intonation as well as the use of indicative particles are often the indicator of what datum and what novum is. And thus for example in the sentence *Columbus discovered America*, the word "America" is the subject. It is doubtless that what we utter is seldom drifting in a pragmatic void. Most of the sentences to a smaller or greater extent make reference to the context and is uttered in order to provide the interlocutor with new information. It is also true

² This theory was i.a. propagated by H. Paul, G. v. d. Gabelentz, and in more recent times, V. Mathesius (1967), A. Bogusławska (lecture at a Polish Linguistic Society Meeting in 1965). A later theory of the latter author (*Of the propositional components of an utterance*) differs considerably from the one discussed herein.

to a certain extent that the analysis of the common language, abstracting from conditions in which something is uttered, would be incomplete. Is it so however that when we utter a sentence we really make a reference to one subject at most.

Among the expressions of the common language there is a considerable group of such expressions, what I mean are proper names and pronouns, whose use is governed by contextual rules. No-one will use the sentence *John loves Mary* if they are certain that the recipient will not be able to refer the words "John" and "Mary" to relevant persons. Also, no-one will say *I need this for that*, if the circumstances accompanying the utterance do not indicate clearly to what items both of these pronouns refer. Each expression, whose reference is undetermined outside of the context, is the datum in a particular sentence.

If we even limited the term "context" to utterances or situations directly preceding the analysed sentence, it would still be possible to list a number of cases, where this sentence will contain more than one datum, e.g. *I went to my cousin with the cherries. SHE washed THEM pedantically in cold water. My friend's father went to give a lecture in Cracow. Yet HE totally failed to do IT properly THERE.*

Finally, there are cases, when it is difficult to say what the datum and what the novum is. In the text: *Smith requests a holiday leave. His wife got ill*, the datum of the sentence *His wife got ill* would be the pronoun "his", referring to the abovementioned Smith. Accordingly, this sentence should be interpreted as an utterance communicating two things about Smith: that he has a wife and that this wife got ill. Analogically, the sentence *My cactus is withering*, would be informing not of some cactus but of the person of the speaker, and the sentence *The father of Socrates is not a well known person* would not be about Sophroniscus, but Socrates himself, etc. The sentence, *The mongrel, unfortunately, dies after a few days* in the following text: *I brought myself a dog from the countryside. The mongrel, unfortunately, dies after a few days*, would be about a certain dog, that it was a mongrel and that it died after a few days. On the other hand the word "mongrel" makes a reference to the same item, as the word dog used previously, otherwise we would need to assume that the reference in the quoted utterance is undetermined.

In the datum position there often appear non-nominal expressions, e.g.: *Who is that? IT WAS your friend. — I don't understand why he is always doing all these sports. But it is probably nice to MOVE in the fresh air. — It is not known how it happened. The head of the gang just ESCAPED. — I*

assumed that it will be she who will get admitted to the university. However, the other one WAS. The datum-novum theory would require adaptation of an ontology, whose objects would be what "it was," "to move," "escaped" and "was," etc. refer to; an ontology according to which "an item would be" everything is a certain circumstance that any language expression could refer to totally.

The Problems of the Logicians

As the linguistic standpoints concerning the issue of the subject may be argued as being ambiguous and too general, then the views of logicians are usually characterised by one-sidedness and a too narrow understanding of the subject-predicate relation. According to logicians such relations take place only in certain atom sentences or in some sentences composed of an individual name and a predicate.

According to the tradition reaching as far back as Aristotle, the judgement most fundamental for our thinking is considered to be the judgement consisting in the separation from reality of a certain fragment thereof, a substance and then in ascribing a certain property to such substance; or to use a more modern terminology, a judgement consisting in separation of an individual and including it into a certain set.

The logical controversies pertain to the problem, what sentences express such judgments, i.e. which of the sentences are subject to division into subject and predicate. In the opinion of some (Russell 1967; Searle 1967; Ryle 1951), subjects may only be proper names. Only with the use of proper names do we distinguish the substance without ascribing anything to it, for the reason that proper names do not mean anything (in the sense that they do not connote anything), but they only name something. Any other nominal expressions either have the predicative function, or (defined descriptions) constitute dependent fragments of compound assertions, requiring in their developed notation the use of quantifiers and variables. Therefore, the subject-predicate relation takes place only in atom sentences with a one-argument predicate, i.e. in such sentences as: *John sleeps* or *Warsaw is a city*.

In the opinion of others (Czeżowski 1971; Dąbbska 1971; Ajdukiewicz 1965; Linsky 1967), subjects may be any and all individual names, since as Czeżowski wrote: "an act distinguishing the substance is its reference in a single sentence to a subject in a sentence. This may be effected in one of two ways: either by subordinating the substance under a unit term in a descriptive sentence, or by indication thereof in an occasional expression" (Czeżowski 1971: 172). Therefore, subject-predicate relation occurs also in

such sentences as: *The oldest Polish university is in Cracow* or *Peter's father got sick*. In both concepts the subject of the sentence may be no more than one expression. However, if subjectivity is connected with the function of indication of the object, which is then ascribed a certain property, then it is not clear, why in logics one takes into account only simple properties. In the sentence *John is clever* John is ascribed the feature of being clever, in the sentence *John loves Mary* John and Mary are ascribed a relation of love. After all, relations have particular kinds of properties, and sets of ordered pairs, threes, *n*-s, that are special kinds of sets in general. It does not seem that ascribing simple properties to objects is something substantially different from ascribing relations to objects and that sentences with two grammatical components are an example of utterances which are more fundamental for the common language than sentences composed of three or more components. From the fact that a given structure is simpler does not mean that it is at the same time more typical and characteristic. Therefore, provided we consequently analyse the common language with the application of the categories of contemporary logic, then we have to agree with the thesis that a sentence may have as many subjects and as many expressions indicating the objects it contains. According to the foregoing, the subject-predicate relation would be present not only in such sentences as *John is clever* but also in such sentences as *John loves Mary*, where we could distinguish two subjects: "John" and "Mary" and the predicate "loves." The fact that in logical theories it is admissible to have no more than one subject, is probably a dark remnant of the traditional, grammatical predilection to parse any and all sentences into two clauses: the subject and the predicate.

Understanding of the subject-predicate relation as a relation between the expressions indicating the objects and the expressions ascribing (simple or complex) properties thereto seems to be a good and quite general tool for analysing common language. It remains to be determined, which expressions comprise the class of potential sentence subjects.

Radical logicians tend to believe that a subject of the sentence may only be a proper name, less radical logicians — each individual name. The supporters of the proper names theory emphasize the fact that these expressions never (with the exception of non-proper uses such as *All Barbaras are cheerful*) appear in plural and exceptionally rarely appear in syntactic opposition to the complement. Therefore, the mere rules of common language would suggest that subjects of sentences may only be proper names.

The fact, however, that something cannot be a complement does not prove that anything else cannot be a subject, and inferring conclusions on

the semantic properties thereof on the basis of the formal properties of common language, as seems to be demonstrated by the works of British analytical philosophers, is probably the contemporary illustration of being the victim of the "market illusion" first described by Bacon.

Each use of a proper name is individual and at the same time deprived of connotations, which is demonstrated i.a. by the fact that it may be given totally arbitrarily, whereby any other expressions cannot be freely ascribed to objects without considerable breach of language convention. The role of a proper name consists solely of the separation of some object treated as an original datum of the reality, in having the function of replacing an indicative gesture. Only proper names do not tie any prepositional contents, any predicative elements: "A dog may be called 'Fido', but the word 'Fido' conveys no information or misinformation about the dog's qualities, career or whereabouts. To develop this point: one cannot speak of any paraphrasing of the word 'Fido', or its correct or incorrect translation into French, dictionaries do not tell us what proper names mean for the simple reason that they do not mean anything" (Ryle 1967).

If a criterion for being suitable for a subject was the property of uniqueness and at the same time being deprived of any connotations, then there would be a problem with classifying a large number of expressions of common language. It is true that for didactical reasons it is convenient to illustrate the subject function of an expression with the use of such words as "Mary," "Warsaw" or "Fido," which is popular in Anglo-Saxon literature. What we are, however, inclined to include into the group of proper names does not always meet the logical criteria, if strictly perceived.

The name "Mary" may be given to a woman, a mine, a kind of mineral water or a ship. But it happens rarely that someone calls a woman "John" or a child "Biscuit;" and it would be rather difficult to decide, whether in such cases we would be dealing with a breach of the legal, moral or linguistic convention.

There are a lot of expressions, which in view of their spelling are classified as proper names and are undoubtedly used for naming things, but which are complex word formations with a meaning discernible for those who use them. Jerzy Pelc wrote "[...] it rarely happens that a white dog is called Blackie [...]", we would have objections if we were to give the name Fluffy to a dog with short and sleek hair" (Pelc 1971: 91, 115).

The *-owa* (for a married woman) and *-ówna* (for an unmarried woman) suffixes in the Polish language inform us about the marital status of the designee, and the *-ice* suffix informs us that a name pertains to a geographical

location ("Police"). It is common to use pseudonyms and nicknames ("John the Lackland," "Siwy," "Jędrek Hajduk"). Many expressions are composed of two or more independent words ("Palace of Culture," "United States of America," "New York," "Grand Central"). These are undoubtedly proper names, which lack descriptive elements. As it may be observed, however, they are more common in logical works than in common language. Additionally, the etymologists assure us that they are able to explain the sense of names given to people and things. There arise justified doubts, whether the logical concept of names is not an abstract idea, which similarly to the notion of the perfect gas used in physics, constitutes a model and does not have much to do with the actual functioning of the language.

Certainly, a radical solution is possible: one could include into the category of proper names only these expressions which are totally deprived of descriptiveness, and those complex word formations, whose sense is no longer discernible for the users (which, as linguists put it, got lexicalised). It will then turn out that there are but a few proper names in common language and that the expression of a simple judgement consisting in ascribing a certain quality to a certain object in the prevailing number of cases is impossible, due to the lack of linguistic means. Therefore the differentiation between the subject and the predicate would become a tool of analysis for very few utterances.

As it seems, lack of connotations is not after all a necessary condition for being suitable for a subject of a sentence. Proper names understood in a strict manner are the best for indication of the subject, which does not mean that one cannot use other expressions for this purpose. If it were otherwise, we would be unable to ascribe anything to chairs, doors, buildings and similar objects, since we ascribe proper names only to humans, certain animals, geographical objects and specific human creations. It is obvious that language had to develop means which would allow us to speak of all the things that do not have a name at all, also of the things whose names we do not know at a given time.

The descriptiveness of an expression does not only exclude the function of the subject, but is a condition thereof in many cases. The expression *Palace of Culture* is, in view of its origin, a description, but is not at all used to say something of a certain building, but simply to distinguish it. If somebody says *My youngest son caught measles*, he uses the description "my youngest son" not in order to ascertain that there exists someone who has the quality of being the youngest son of that person, but in order to provide the recipient with clear instruction for identification of the person who has

just caught measles. Therefore, if the role of distinguishing the thing from which later something is said might be played not only by proper names (although this semantic function is the most characteristic for proper names exactly), then perhaps the class of potential subjects of a sentence needs to be identified, as postulated by the supporters of a milder approach in logistics, with the class of individual names.

This category certainly includes all proper names, descriptions, indicatives and personal pronouns in singular. Such words as "river" may pertain both to all items of a given class, as for example in the sentence *A river affects the humidity of the adjacent grounds*, as well as to exactly one object: *Do not swim in this spot! The river has whirlpools and unexpected depths here*. The situation of this kind is usually typical for common language — for almost each nominal expression it is possible to find (both linguistic and extra-linguistic) contexts, in which it may be a void, an individual or a general name. The same pertains to an extent with non-nominal expressions. Verbs may be one-, two-, or three-argument predicates (*John reads, John reads a novel, John reads Mary's letter*). One gets the impression that the traditional logical qualifications are hardly adjustable to the language we speak every day.

Theoretically, two solutions present themselves to us in this situation. Firstly, we may assume that most utterances in common language are characterised by ellipticity and may be analysed first, after all the abbreviations have been explained. And so, for example the sentence *A river affects the humidity of the adjacent grounds* would be a conventional, abbreviated form of the following sentence: *Each river affects the humidity of the adjacent grounds*, whereas the sentence *The river has whirlpools and unexpected depths here* is an abbreviation of *This river has whirlpools and unexpected depths here*. In the cases of the first kind, the word "river" is a general name, in the cases of the second kind — it is a dependant fragment of an expression pertaining to a single object.

Secondly, one might adopt a thesis that the expressions of common language are habitually polysemic. In both of the sentences quoted above, we are dealing not with two items of the expression "river," but two items of different, although isomorphic expressions: "river"¹ and "river,"² being an individual name, similarly, as in the pair of sentences: *It was impossible to move the castle to E4 — This castle has not been inhabited for many years*, there appear two isomorphic expressions "castle"¹ referring to a chess figure and "castle"² referring to a certain type of a building. Do these solutions allow for sufficient codification of common language? The postulate for the

supplementation of elliptical utterances before their analysis is well known in linguistics, it pertains, however to other cases. Sentence description should explicitly provide all information contained therein and known to the user. It is justified for such a sentence as *We were waiting until mother left work* to be ascribed the following "deep structure." "I was waiting for mother until mother left work;" otherwise the description would not explicitly indicate the fact that the subordinate sentence pertains to the same person as the object of the main clause. It is also justified e.g. for the sentence *It's been blowing since the morning* to be treated as an abbreviation of the sentence *The wind has been blowing since the morning*, since otherwise the language description would treat as incomplete an utterance, which in the opinion of a user is complete to such an extent that after it has been supplemented it becomes redundant. In such cases the procedure of supplementation is made possible by the strictly linguistic rules (the rule of elimination of the element repeated in the subordinate sentence, the rule of selective limitations for the verb "to blow"); therefore it is known, which missing elements of the utterance are to be supplemented. Sentences of the same kind as *A river affects the humidity of the adjacent grounds* and *The river has whirlpools and unexpected depths here* could indeed be reconstructed; a user hearing them knows that in the first case we are speaking of each river and in the second case we are speaking of a particular river. Nonetheless, most of the utterances in common language are characterised by the fact that their supplementations (in view of the possible emptiness, particularity or generality of the name) cannot be effected without knowledge of the context. Usually the use of the present tense suggests that the name being the syntactic subject has been used in formal supposition. However, this assertion may be considered to be exactly a suggestion and not a linguistic rule. The sentence *The river was sunlit* may pertain perfectly well to any river, e.g. the Nile (if it is uttered by someone on a ship on this river). Yet this may also be a fragment of a sci-fi novel and pertain e.g. to a wide stream of liquid ectoplasm. When we speak, we remove from the language message everything which is unambiguous in a given text. When talking to somebody of our own family, we may say *Father is the central figure in the house* without the fear that our utterance will be understood as an ascertainment of common patriarchalism. Supplementation of a common language utterance (in view of the logical classifications) is possible only in the cases when such operations are justified by language rules, i.e. such rules which are expressed in the users' intuition. A user hearing the sentence *Father is the central figure in the house*, knowing nothing of the circumstances in which it was uttered, cannot be sure whether it pertains to

a particular person or to all fathers. A language researcher has nothing left to do but to suspend the semantic analysis of this utterance or to accept that there are two possible interpretations.

The second possible standpoint, ascribing habitual polysmy to common language expressions, entails similar consequences. The trouble with answering the question "What is meaning?" is so well-known that there is no need to present it here in detail. We might just note that this standpoint would add to an ordinary homonymy a homonymy of such a kind, which would be characteristic for common nouns in view of their emptiness, particularity or generality. Such words as "castle" would be characterised by double polysemy and it would be extremely difficult to construct such (even "working") a notion of meaning, which would make it possible to distinguish between polysmy connected with different connotations from polysemy connected with the same connotation but a different denotation.

The theory of habitual polysemy would finally be forced, as in the previous one, to resign from the semantic interpretation of many sentences, if these sentences are provided in isolation from the context. Similarly, it is impossible to determine without the knowledge of the circumstances of the utterance, whether in the sentence *The castle seemed strong*, one meant a chess figure or a historical building, as a researcher of common language is unable to provide a complete semantic interpretation of the sentence *The river is sunlit* without the knowledge of the context, they may only note that the sentence is polysemic.

As it would follow from the above deliberations, adoption of a thesis on the separation of the semantic classes of common language and the assumption on the ellipticity of its utterances connected therewith or the assumption of the habitual polysemy of its expression, does not result in full semantic interpretation of the sentences, and in particular it does not always make it possible to decide the issue of the subject, since the fact that whether in a given sentence a certain object, or objects, is ascribed a certain property is in many cases decided by the context of the utterance.

These difficulties are not at all removed by another research standpoint that has become popular recently in scientific literature, which postulates that broad pragmatic circumstances of utterances are taken into account and that subject to classification are not the types of expressions, but the types of uses of expressions.

The followers of this direction (Pelc 1971; Strawson 1967; Ryle 1967) note that the most striking feature of common language is the fact that the same expression may be used in many various ways. Each expression, depending

on the context, changes its semantic functions and this is a somewhat natural phenomenon — the vocabulary of a language is so slender, as compared to the reality which it needs to encompass, that out of necessity it flexibly adjusts to the changing circumstances of the utterance.

Such properties as emptiness, particularity, generality, demonstrativeness, ascription, etc. pertain not to the expressions themselves, but to their uses. And thus, the word "river" treated as an isolated dictionary entry does not refer to anything, becomes a unit name, an empty name, or a very general name, but only in particular contexts. Therefore, there is no countable class of potential subjects of a sentence, but only a class of subjective uses of expressions, i.e. such uses, in which a given expression, in view of the context, would be characterised by particularity, indicative or identifying nature: "the fulfilment of the conditions for a correct ascriptive use of an expression is a part of what is stated by such a use; but the fulfilment of the conditions for a correct referring use of an expression is never part of what is stated, though it is (in the relevant sense of 'implied') implied by such a use" (Strawson 1967: 402). The criterion of the use of an expression to make a unique reference would be "some device, or devices, for showing both that a unique reference is intended and what a unique reference it is" (Strawson 1967: 401). Nearly every expression of common language may be used as a unique reference, although obviously there exist some expressions which cannot be used in any other way. What is meant here are proper names and some occasional expressions such as e.g. "he," "it" or "I." The devices signalling a unique reference are in this case: minimal descriptiveness and making the expressions maximally dependant on the context.

This is the end of generalisations which may be provided by the theory of common language understood as a theory of the use of expressions and sentences, since the remaining devices, deciding whether an expression has or has not been used as a unique reference are impossible to enumerate explicitly and sufficiently. It would seem that a signal of referential and not ascriptive use of a description is the occurrence thereof in the place of the syntactical subject. Let us look for example at the sentence with a description considered by P. T. Geach (1971) *The stockbroker who employed Joseph did not employ any Negro*. From this sentence it is possible to infer that Joseph is not a Negro. This, in Geach's opinion was to support the fact that the expression *the stockbroker who employed Joseph* is not a name (i.e. it is not the subject). If however one consequently includes pragmatic elements into common language semantics, then one can indicate examples, where the description *the stockbroker who employed Joseph*, depending on

the context, has sometimes a referential and sometimes an ascriptive role. In the following context: *Have you ever come across racism? Several times. The stockbroker who employed Joseph did not employ any Negro* the sole purpose of the description is for the recipient of the utterance to easily identify the person who turned out to be a racist, and not for the recipient to learn that a stockbroker existed who employed Joseph and therefore Joseph is not a Negro, since both of the facts are most probably well known to him (or at least the speaker makes the assumption that the recipient knows who Joseph and his employer are), moreover this is a pragmatic condition for the use of this description in this particular context.

On the other hand, in the context *Was the Joseph you mentioned a Negro? No. The stockbroker who employed Joseph did not employ any Negro*, the description *the stockbroker who employed Joseph* has a clear ascriptive function, since here not only a fact is stated that a certain stockbroker did not employ Negroes, but also there is asserted a connection between the fact that a stockbroker employed Joseph, and the fact that the same stockbroker did not employ Negroes.

It seems that a sufficiently general characterisation of the factors which decide whether a description is used as a subject or not, is a task doomed to fail. Among these factors a significant role is played by non-linguistic factors, and these are so varied, changing and unpredictable, that someone who would like to characterise the class of subject and predicate uses of expressions, out of necessity would have to limit himself to several stereotypical examples. Strawson wrote "The requirement for the correct application of an expression in its referring use to a certain thing is something over and above any requirement derived from such ascriptive meaning as the expression may have; it is, namely, the requirement that the thing should be in a certain relation to the speaker and to the context of utterance. Let me call this the contextual requirement. Thus, for example, in the limiting case of the word *I* the contextual requirement is that the thing should be identical with the speaker; but in the case of most expressions which have a referring use this requirement cannot be so precisely specified" (Strawson 1967: 401).

Therefore, irrespective of the fact whether one claims that the semantic classes of common language are disjunctive and its utterances are elliptic or polysemic, or whether one resigns from the classification of expressions for the benefit of the classification of uses, the problem of the subject and the predicate considerably exceeds the frames of the description of the language understood as a system, as de Saussure's *langue*. The fact whether a given expression is a subject of a sentence (i.e. whether in such sentences it is

an expression or an abbreviation of a unique and referring expression, or according to the second version, whether in this sentence in its particular use or in one of its uses it pertains to exactly one object and at the same time it distinguishes it or whether, according to the third version, whether in this sentence it is used referentially), is decided in common language not only by the syntactic and semantic rules, but also the non-linguistic context.

This raises the question: is it possible to pursue such semantics of the common language which would resign from the subject-predicate opposition?

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