Abstract

The present work explores the possibility of conciliating the truth-conditional relevance of referential uses of definite descriptions with the assignment of a univocal linguistic meaning to these constructions. It is argued that conciliation is possible if we reject the thesis, central to the debate between Russellians and ambiguity theorists, according to which referential uses are truth-conditionally relevant if and only if they constitute referential meanings. We sketch a framework within which the denial of that thesis has theoretical content, by drawing on the conceptual resources of Relevance Theory and on a pragmatic conception of reference, following Strawson (1950). The linguistic meaning of definite descriptions is analyzed as a procedural meaning (Blakemore 1987) that is semantically underdetermined with respect to both referential and attributive readings, and a pragmatic strategy for understanding this ambiguity is sketched.

Keywords

Semantic underdeterminacy; Truth-conditional pragmatics; Speaker reference.