

UNIT 6 PREDICATES, REFERRING EXPRESSIONS, AND UNIVERSE OF DISCOURSE

Entry requirements REFERRING EXPRESSION (Unit 4) and PREDICATE (Unit 5). If you feel you understand these notions, take the entry test below. Otherwise, review Units 4 and 5.

- Entry test**
- (1) Say which of the following sentences are equative (E), and which are not (N).
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| (a) <i>My parrot is holidaying in the South of France</i> | E / N |
| (b) <i>Dr Kunastrokins is an ass</i> | E / N |
| (c) <i>Tristram Shandy is a funny book</i> | E / N |
| (d) <i>Our next guest is Dr Kunastrokins</i> | E / N |
- (2) Circle the referring expressions in the following sentences.
- (a) *I am looking for any parrot that can sing*
- (b) *Basil saw a rat*
- (c) *These matches were made in Sweden*
- (d) *A dentist is a person who looks after people's teeth*

Feedback (1) (a) N (b) N (c) N (d) E (2) (a) I (b) *Basil, a rat* (c) *these matches, Sweden* (d) None

If you have scored less than 4 out of 4 correct in (1), you should review 'Predicates' (Unit 5). If you have scored less than 4 out of 4 correct in (2), you should review 'Referring Expressions' (Unit 4). If you got the test completely right, continue to the introduction.

Introduction We explore further the distinction and the relationship between referring expressions and predicates. We will see how the same word can be used for the radically different functions of reference and predication. And we will begin to see how these two functions fit together in the overall language system.

Comment Some expressions are almost always referring expressions no matter what sentences they occur in.

- Practice**
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| (1) Can the proper name <i>Mohammed Ali</i> ever be used as the predicator of a sentence? | Yes / No |
| (2) Can the proper name <i>Cairo</i> ever be used as a predicator of a sentence? | Yes / No |

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| (3) In general, can proper names ever be used as predicates? | Yes / No |
| (4) Can the verb <i>hit</i> ever be used as a referring expression? | Yes / No |
| (5) Can the preposition <i>on</i> ever be used as a referring expression? | Yes / No |
| (6) In general, can any verb or preposition be used to refer? | Yes / No |

Feedback	(1) No (2) No (3) No (We would analyse cases like <i>That man is an Einstein</i> as being figurative for <i>That man is similar to Einstein</i> , where the real predicate is <i>similar</i> , and not <i>Einstein</i> , but this analysis could conceivably be challenged.) (4) No (5) No (6) No: they are always predicates and can never be used as referring expressions.
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Comment The distinction between referring expressions and predicates is absolute: there is not a continuum running from proper names at one end, through 'borderline cases' to verbs and prepositions at the other. Either an expression is used in a given utterance to refer to some entity in the world or it is not so used.

There are some phrases, in particular indefinite noun phrases, that can be used in two ways, either as referring expressions, or as predicating expressions.

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| Practice | (1) Is <i>a man</i> in <i>John attacked a man</i> a referring expression? | Yes / No |
| | (2) Is <i>a man</i> in <i>John is a man</i> a referring expression? | Yes / No |

Feedback	(1) Yes (2) No
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Comment *A man* can be either a referring expression or a predicating expression, depending on the context. The same is true of other indefinite NPs. On the face of it, this may seem startling. How are we able to use the same expressions for different purposes? We will try to untangle this riddle.

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| Practice | (1) Imagine that you and I are in a room with a man and a woman, and, making no visual signal of any sort, I say to you, 'The man stole my wallet'. In this situation, how would you know the referent of the subject referring expression? |
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| (2) If in the situation described above I had said, 'A man stole my wallet', would you automatically know the referent of the subject expression <i>a man</i> ? | Yes / No |
| (3) So does the definite article, <i>the</i> , prompt the hearer to (try to) identify the referent of a referring expression? | Yes / No |
| (4) Does the indefinite article, <i>a</i> , prompt the hearer to (try to) identify the referent of a referring expression? | Yes / No |

Feedback (1) By finding in the room an object to which the predicate contained in the subject referring expression (i.e. *man*) could be truthfully applied (2) No (3) Yes (4) No

Comment The presence of a predicate in a referring expression helps the hearer to identify the referent of a referring expression. Notice that we have just drawn a distinction between referring and identifying the referent of a referring expression. We will explore this distinction.

- Practice**
- (1) Can the referent of the pronoun *I* be uniquely identified when this pronoun is uttered? Yes / No
 - (2) Can the referent of the pronoun *you* be uniquely identified when this pronoun is uttered? Yes / No
 - (3) Imagine again the situation where you and I are in a room with a man and a woman, and I say to you (making no visual gesture), 'She stole my wallet'. Would you be able to identify the referent of *She*? Yes / No

Feedback (1) Yes (if equating it with the speaker of the utterance is regarded as sufficient identification). (2) In many situations it can, but not always. (We usually, but not always, know who is being addressed.) (3) Yes (that is, in the situation described, if I say to you, 'She stole my wallet', you extract from the referring expression *She* the predicate *female*, which is part of its meaning, and look for something in the speech situation to which this predicate could truthfully be applied. Thus in the situation envisaged, you identify the woman as the referent of *She*. If there had been two women in the room, and no other indication were given, the referent of *She* could not be uniquely identified.)

Comment To sum up, predicates do not refer. But they can be used by a hearer when contained in the meaning of a referring expression, to identify the referent of that expression. Some more examples follow:

- Practice**
- (1) Does the phrase *in the corner* contain any predicates? Yes / No
 - (2) Is the phrase *the man who is in the corner* a referring expression? Yes / No
 - (3) Do the predicates in the phrase *in the corner* help to identify the referent of the referring expression in (2) above? Yes / No
 - (4) Is the predicate *bald* contained in the meaning of *the bald man*? Yes / No
 - (5) Is the predicate *man* contained in the meaning of *the bald man*? Yes / No

Feedback (1) Yes (*in* and *corner*) (2) Yes (We say that the phrase *in the corner* is embedded in the longer phrase.) (3) Yes (4) Yes (5) Yes

Comment Speakers refer to things in the course of utterances by means of referring expressions. The words in a referring expression give clues which help the hearer to identify its referent. In particular, predicates may be embedded in referring expressions as, for instance, the predicates *man*, *in*, and *corner* are embedded in the referring expression *the man in the corner*. The correct referent of such a referring expression is something which completely fits, or satisfies, the description made by the combination of predicates embedded in it.

We now introduce the notion of a generic sentence. So far, we have developed an analysis of a very common sentence type, containing a subject, which is a referring expression, and a predicate (and possibly other expressions). Not all sentences are of this type.

- Practice**
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| (1) In <i>The whale is the largest mammal</i> (interpreted in the most usual way) does <i>the whale</i> pick out some particular object in the world (a whale)? | Yes / No |
| (2) So is <i>The whale</i> here a referring expression? | Yes / No |
| (3) In <i>The whale is the largest mammal</i> does <i>the largest mammal</i> refer to some particular mammal? | Yes / No |
| (4) So are there any referring expressions in <i>The whale is the largest mammal</i> ? | Yes / No |

Feedback (1) No (2) No (3) No (4) No

Definition A GENERIC SENTENCE is a sentence in which some statement is made about a whole unrestricted class of individuals, as opposed to any particular individual.

Example *The whale is a mammal* (understood in the most usual way) is a generic sentence.

That whale over there is a mammal is not a generic sentence.

Comment Note that generic sentences can be introduced by either *a* or *the* (or neither).

Practice Are the following generic sentences?

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| (1) <i>Gentlemen prefer blondes</i> | Yes / No |
| (2) <i>Jasper is a twit</i> | Yes / No |
| (3) <i>The male of the species guards the eggs</i> | Yes / No |
| (4) <i>A wasp makes its nest in a hole in a tree</i> | Yes / No |
| (5) <i>A wasp just stung me on the neck</i> | Yes / No |

Feedback	(1) Yes (2) No (3) Yes (4) Yes (5) No
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Comment Language is used for talking about things in the real world, like parrots, paper-clips, babies, etc. All of these things exist. But the things we can talk about and the things that exist are not exactly the same. We shall now explore the way in which language creates unreal worlds and allows us to talk about non-existent things. We start from the familiar notion of reference.

Our basic, and very safe, definition of reference (Unit 3) was as a relationship between part of an utterance and a thing in the world. But often we use words in a way which suggests that a relationship exactly like reference holds between a part of an utterance and non-existent things. The classic case is that of the word *unicorn*.

- Practice**
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| (1) Do unicorns exist in the real world? | Yes / No |
| (2) In which two of the following contexts are unicorns most frequently mentioned? Circle your answer.
(a) in fairy stories
(b) in news broadcasts
(c) in philosophical discussions about reference
(d) in scientific text books | |
| (3) Is it possible to imagine worlds different in certain ways from the world we know actually to exist? | Yes / No |
| (4) In fairy tale and science fiction worlds is everything different from the world we know? | Yes / No |
| (5) In the majority of fairy tales and science fiction stories that you know, do the fictional characters discourse with each other according to the same principles that apply in real life? | Yes / No |
| (6) Do fairy tale princes, witches, etc. seem to refer in their utterances to things in the world? | Yes / No |

Feedback	(1) No (2) (a) and (c) (3) Yes (4) No, otherwise we could not comprehend them. (5) Yes (6) Yes
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Comment Semantics is concerned with the meanings of words and sentences and it would be an unprofitable digression to get bogged down in questions of what exists and what doesn't. We wish to avoid insoluble disagreements between atheist and theist semanticists, for example, over whether one could refer to God. To avoid such problems, we adopt a broad interpretation of the notion referring expression (see Unit 4) so that any expression that can be used to refer to any entity in the real world or in any imaginary world will be called a referring expression.

Practice According to this view of what counts as a referring expression, are the following possible referring expressions, i.e. could they be used in utterances to refer (either to real or to fictitious entities)?

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|-------------------------|----------|
| (1) <i>God</i> | Yes / No |
| (2) <i>and</i> | Yes / No |
| (3) <i>Moses</i> | Yes / No |
| (4) <i>that unicorn</i> | Yes / No |

Feedback	(1) Yes (2) No (3) Yes (4) Yes
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Comment Notice that we only let our imagination stretch to cases where the things in the world are different; we do not allow our imagination to stretch to cases where the principles of the structure and use of language are different. To do so would be to abandon the object of our study. So we insist (as in (2) above) that the English conjunction *and*, for example, could never be a referring expression.

The case of unicorns was relatively trivial. Now we come to some rather different cases.

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| Practice | (1) If unicorns existed, would they be physical objects? | Yes / No |
| | (2) Do the following expressions refer to physical objects? | |
| | (a) <i>Christmas Day 1980</i> | Yes / No |
| | (b) <i>one o'clock in the morning</i> | Yes / No |
| | (c) <i>when Eve was born</i> | Yes / No |
| | (d) <i>93 million miles</i> | Yes / No |
| | (e) <i>the distance between the Earth and the Sun</i> | Yes / No |
| | (f) <i>'God Save the Queen'</i> | Yes / No |
| | (g) <i>the British national anthem</i> | Yes / No |
| | (h) <i>eleven hundred</i> | Yes / No |
| | (i) <i>one thousand one hundred</i> | Yes / No |

Feedback	(1) Yes; it's difficult to conceive of them in any other way. (2) (a)–(i) No
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Comment So far we have mainly kept to examples of reference to physical objects, like *John*, *my chair*, *the cat*, and *Cairo*. What are we to make of expressions like *tomorrow* and *the British national anthem*, which cannot possibly be said to refer to physical objects? It is in fact reasonable to envisage our notion of reference in such a way that we can call these referring expressions also, because language uses these expressions in many of the same ways as it uses the clear cases of referring expressions.

Even though expressions like *tomorrow*, *the British national anthem*, *eleven hundred*, *the distance between the Earth and the Sun*, etc. do not indicate physical objects, language treats these expressions in a way exactly parallel to referring expressions. We call them referring expressions along with *John*, *the roof*, and *Cairo*. We say that *the British national anthem* is used to refer to a particular song, that *eleven hundred* is used to refer to a particular number, *one o'clock* to a particular time, *93 million miles* to a particular distance, and so on.

Language is used to talk about the real world, and can be used to talk about an infinite variety of abstractions, and even of entities in imaginary, unreal worlds.

Definition We define the UNIVERSE OF DISCOURSE for any utterance as the particular world, real or imaginary (or part real, part imaginary), that the speaker assumes he is talking about at the time.

Example When an astronomy lecturer, in a serious lecture, states that the Earth revolves around the Sun, the universe of discourse is, we all assume, the real world (or universe).

When I tell my children a bedtime story and say ‘The dragon set fire to the woods with his hot breath’, the universe of discourse is not the real world but a fictitious world.

Practice Is the universe of discourse in each of the following cases the real world (as far as we can tell) (*R*), or a (partly) fictitious world (*F*)?

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|---|--------------|
| (1) Newsreader on April 14th 1981: ‘The American space-shuttle successfully landed at Edwards Airforce Base, California, today’ | <i>R / F</i> |
| (2) Mother to child: ‘Don’t touch those berries. They might be poisonous’ | <i>R / F</i> |
| (3) Mother to child: ‘Santa Claus might bring you a toy telephone’ | <i>R / F</i> |
| (4) Patient in psychiatric ward: ‘As your Emperor, I command you to defeat the Parthians’ | <i>R / F</i> |
| (5) Doctor to patient: ‘You cannot expect to live longer than another two months’ | <i>R / F</i> |
| (6) Patient (joking bravely): ‘When I’m dead, I’ll walk to the cemetery to save the cost of a hearse’ | <i>R / F</i> |

Feedback	(1) <i>R</i> (2) <i>R</i> (3) <i>F</i> (4) <i>F</i> (5) <i>R</i> (6) <i>F</i> , dead people do not walk in the real world
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Comment These were relatively clear cases. Note that no universe of discourse is a totally fictitious world. Santa Claus is a fiction, but the toy telephones he

might bring do actually exist. So in examples like this we have interaction between fact and fiction, between real and imaginary worlds. When two people are ‘arguing at cross-purposes’, they could be said to be working within partially different universes of discourse.

Example Theist: ‘Diseases must serve some good purpose, or God would not allow them’
Atheist: ‘I cannot accept your premisses’

Here the theist is operating with a universe of discourse which is a world in which God exists. The atheist’s assumed universe of discourse is a world in which God does not exist.

Practice In the following situations, are the participants working with the same universe of discourse (*S*), or different universes (*D*), as far as you can tell?

- (1) A: ‘Did Jack’s son come in this morning?’
B: ‘I didn’t know Jack had a son’
A: ‘Then who’s that tall chap that was here yesterday?’
B: ‘I don’t know, but I’m pretty sure Jack hasn’t got any kids’
A: ‘I’m sure Jack’s son was here yesterday’ *S / D*
- (2) Time traveller from the eighteenth century: ‘Is the King of France on good terms with the Tsar of Russia?’
Twenty-first-century person: ‘Huh?’ *S / D*
- (3) Optician: ‘Please read the letters on the bottom line of the card’
Patient: ‘E G D Z Q N B A’
Optician: ‘Correct. Well done’ *S / D*

Feedback (1) *D*: in A’s universe of discourse Jack’s son exists; in B’s he does not.
(2) *D* (3) *S*

Comment Assuming the same universe of discourse is essential to successful communication. The participants in questions (1) and (2) are in a sense talking about different worlds. Assuming different universes of discourse is not the only reason for breakdown of communication: there can be other causes – both participants’ assuming that exactly the same entities exist in the world, but referring to them by different words (an extreme case of this would be two participants speaking different languages) – or, of course, sheer inarticulacy.

Summary In the course of a sequence of utterances, speakers use referring expressions to refer to entities which may be concrete or abstract, real or fictitious. The predicates embedded in a referring expression help the hearer to identify its referent. Semantics is not concerned with the factual status of things in the world but with meaning in language. The notion of universe of discourse is introduced to account for the way in which language allows us to refer to non-existent things.

Unit 6 Study Guide and Exercises

Directions After you have read Unit 6 you should be able to tackle the following questions to test your understanding of the main ideas raised in the unit.

- 1 You should understand these terms and concepts from this unit:
generic sentence
universe of discourse
- 2 Which of the following are generic sentences? Explain.
 - a Americans like to eat apple pie
 - b Fred likes to buy Uzis
 - c A bird lays eggs
 - d My pet finch just laid an egg
- 3 Comment on the italicized items below in light of the points made in this chapter.
 - a John wants to marry *a* girl with green eyes
 - b I am looking for *a* pencil
 - c *The* whale is the largest mammal
 - d *The* whales at Seaworld entertain visitors
- 4 Language can create unreal worlds. Explain and give an illustration different from those discussed in this unit.
- 5 How was the question of the existence of God resolved with respect to the notion **referring expression**? How are we able to resolve the apparent difficulty of dealing with such referring expressions as *yesterday*, *four hundred*, and *the distance between Detroit and Chicago*, etc.?
- 6 How is it that we can understand speech and writings about non-existent, imaginary worlds?
- 7 Construct a short example of a conversational exchange different from the ones given in this unit which illustrates that the participants are working within partially different universes of discourse.
- 8 Why is it that 'no universe of discourse is a totally fictitious world'? What would happen if this were the case?