

# Referring, denoting, and expressing

1 September 2023

LING 405

The College of Staten Island, CUNY

# Referring

- In this chapter, we're dealing largely with *reference*.
- What is reference?
- What is a *referring expression*?

A referring expression is an expression (normally some kind of noun phrase) which a speaker uses to refer to something. (p.18)



- What is a *rigid designator*?

A proper name... always refers to the same individual. For this reason, they are sometimes referred to as rigid designators. "Natural kind" terms ... are similar. When they are used to refer to the species as a whole, or the substance in general, rather than any specific instance, these terms are also rigid designators. (p.18)

# Rigid Designators



- So rigid designators are referring expressions for which context does not matter.
- Are the underlined words below rigid designators?
- Winston Churchill was a divisive leader.
- The Prime Minister is doing a great job.
- Cats are natural carnivores.
- My cat prefers dry food over wet.
- The octopus has eight tentacles and is quite intelligent.
- Camels can travel far without drinking.
- Methane is lighter than air and highly flammable.
- The octopus climbed out of its tank last night.
- Camels are in the other section of the zoo.
- The President has just arrived.

# Other Referring Expressions

- Most referring expressions are *not* rigid designators. For them, reference does depend on context.
- What are *definite descriptions*?

Definite noun phrases ... normally used in contexts where the hearer is able to identify a unique referent.

- a. this book
- b. the sixteenth President of the United States
- c. my eldest brother (p. 20)

- What are *indefinite descriptions*?

Indefinite descriptions may be used to refer to a specific individual ... or they may be non-specific. Specific indefinites are referring expressions, while **non-specific indefinites are not**.

# Indefinite Descriptions

Are the following indefinite descriptions referring expressions?

- My sister has just married a cowboy.
- My sister would never marry a cowboy.
- My sister wants to marry a cowboy.
- There's a notebook on the table.
- I'm going to buy a notebook tomorrow.
- My uncle doesn't need a notebook.
- I saw a villain.
- I hope I never get accosted by a villain.

The answer may be yes, or no, or it may be ambiguous.



# Discussion

Which of the following NPs are being used to *refer* to something?

I never promised you *a rose garden*.

St. Benedict, the father of Western monasticism, planted *a rose garden* at his early monastery in Subiaco near Rome.

My sister wants to marry *a policeman*.

My sister married *a policeman*.

Leibniz searched for *the solution to the equation*.

Leibniz discovered *the solution to the equation*.

*No cat* likes being bathed.

# Sense and denotation

- What's the difference between sense and denotation?
- *Sense* refers to the context-independent parts of a word's meaning. Its definition.
- What is *denotation*?

The other sort of meaning, which does depend on context. The denotation of a referring expression [...] will normally be its referent. The denotation of a content word (e.g. an adjective, verb, or common noun) is the set of all things in the current universe of discourse which the word could be used to describe.

- The denotation of *tree* is a set consisting of all trees; the denotation of *snore* is a set containing all things that snore.
- We should be able to identify the sense and denotation of a given word.

# Practice with sense and denotation

- Identify the *sense* and *denotation* of the following words.

Canadian

talented

crocodile

musician

panther

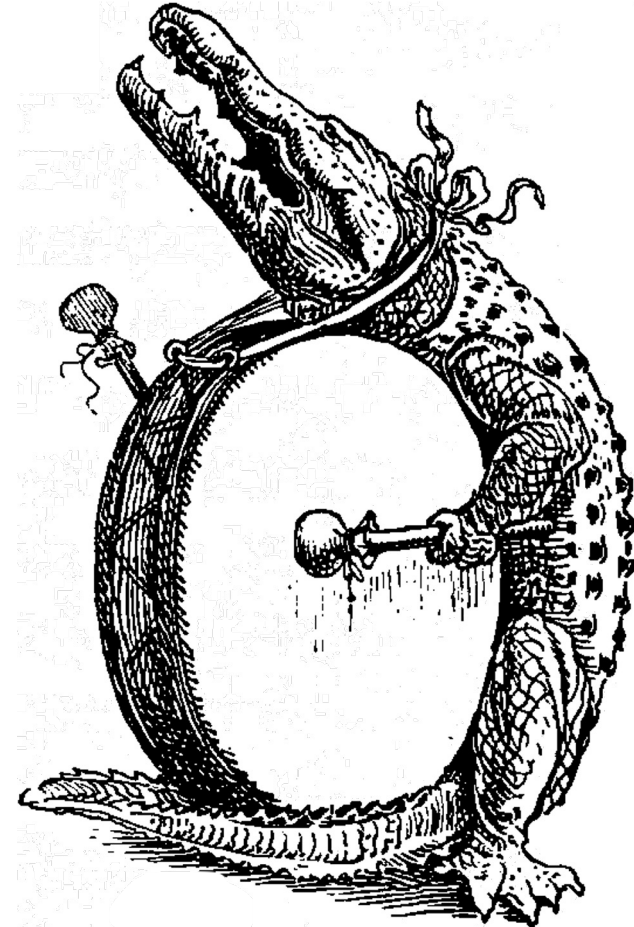
drum (v)

computer

reptile

sing

gigantic





# Discussion

Which of the following pairs of expressions have the same sense?  
Which have the same denotation? Explain.

cordates (animals with hearts) –and– renates (animals with kidneys)

animals with gills and scales –and– fish

your first-born son –and– your oldest male offspring

Ronald Reagan –and– the governor of California

my oldest sister –and– your Aunt Betty

the man who invented the phonograph –and– the man who invented the lightbulb

# Denotation

- Denotation depends upon the universe in which the discourse takes place. The same exact word can have a different denotation in different discursive universes.



lemur (real-world)



lemur (*Avatar: The Last Airbender*)

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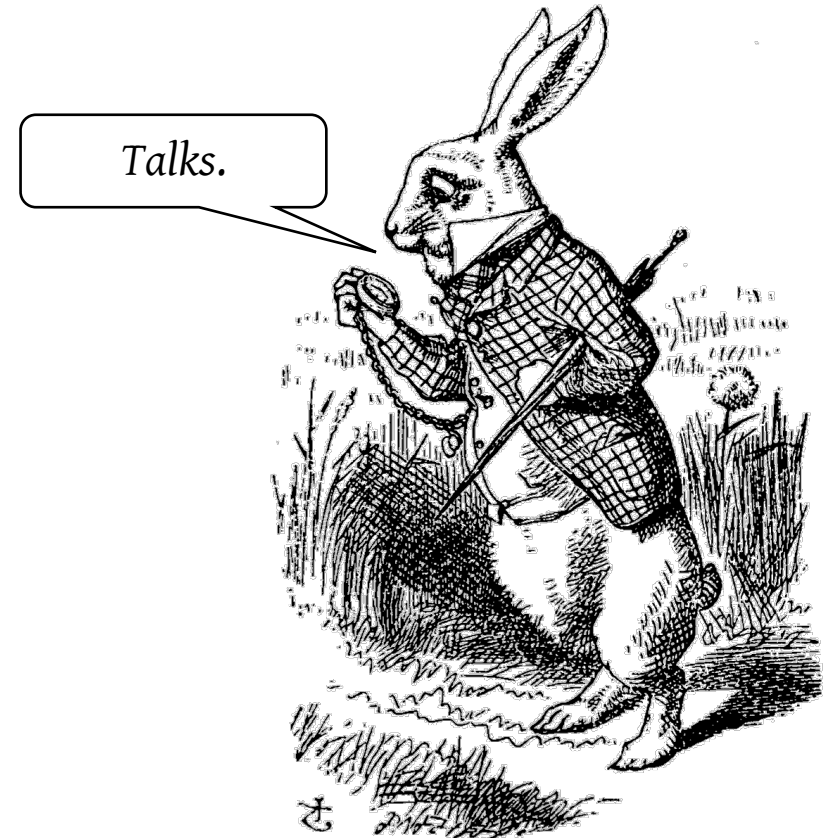
braces (USA)



braces (UK)

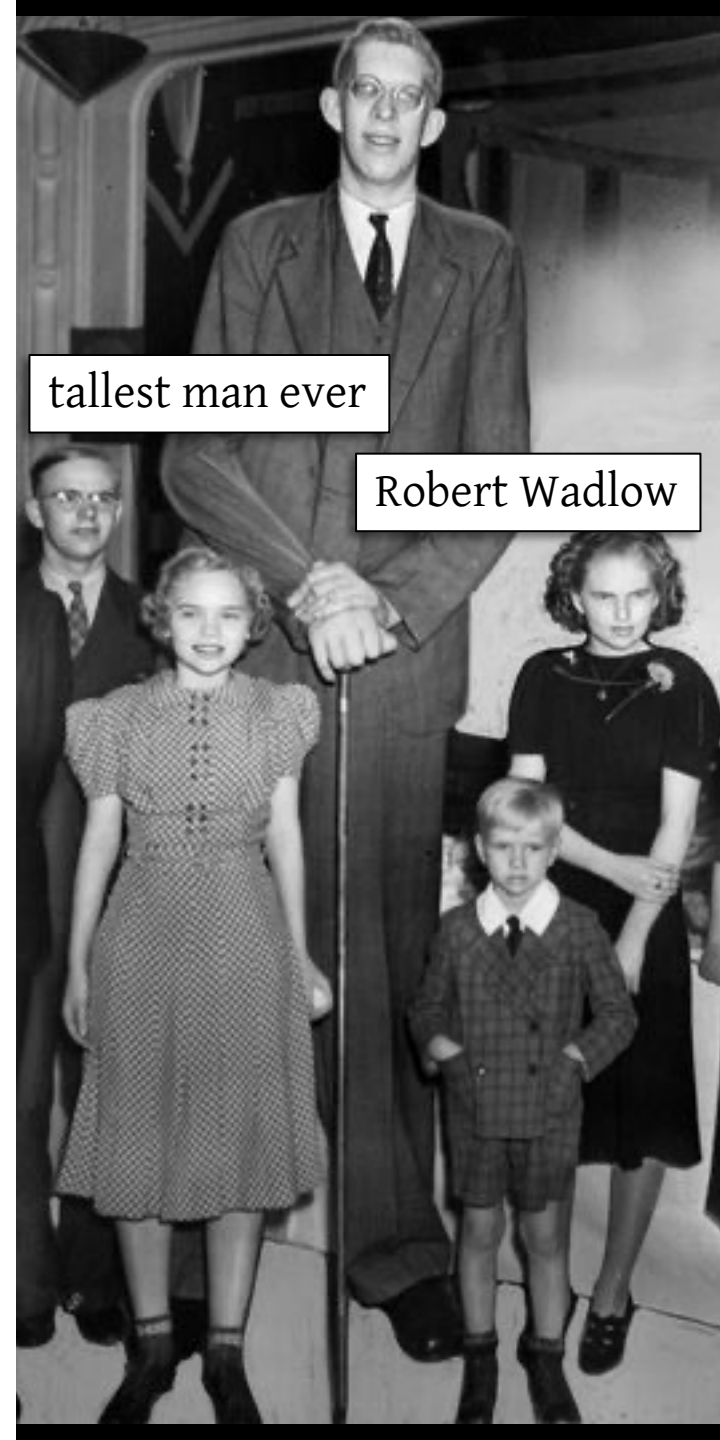
# Denotation

- Denotation depends upon the universe in which the discourse takes place. The same exact word can have a different denotation in different discursive universes.
- What's the example given in the text?
- Can you think of other examples?



# Sense and denotation

- Two expressions with the same sense must always have the same denotation.
- Two expressions with the same denotation can have two different senses.
- Why does this make logical sense?
  
- What're some other examples of expressions with the same denotation but different senses?
- What're some expressions that always have the same sense and denotation as one another?



# Expressions that don't denote

- There are plenty of expressions that have a sense, but don't denote anything at all.

Some examples from the text:

- the present King of France
  - the largest prime number
  - the diamond as big as the Ritz
  - the unicorn in the garden
- Why do we say that these words don't denote anything?
  - Can we imagine a world in which they would denote something?

# Expressive meaning

- What's expressive meaning?

Words like *ouch* and *oops* ... They convey a certain kind of meaning, yet they neither refer to things in the world, nor help to determine the conditions under which a sentence would be true. ... “the kind of meaning by virtue of which speakers express, rather than describe, their beliefs, attitudes and feelings.” (p.25)

- Words like *ouch* and *oops* are called **expressives**. Their only apparent meaning is expressive.
- But many other, normal words have expressive meaning as well: they express how the speaker feels about the referent.

# Expressive meaning

What might one express by choosing one of these words over the other?

- father vs. dad
- man vs. guy
- alcohol vs. booze
- eating vs. devouring
- laugh vs. guffaw
- kid vs. child
- woman vs. female



# Assignment (due 8 September)

- Read chapter 3.
- Submit quiz #1 by start of class.
- Submit Writing Assignment 1:

Find a word in a language other than English that has a **purely expressive meaning**, like *oops* and *ouch*. Mention what language it comes from and explain how it is used. Make it clear that you understand what it means for something to have only expressive meaning. Email this to me as a .pdf or .docx by 11:59pm on September 8th.