

Seminar, Fall 2004, on "Plurality" (McKay)

There are lots of topics, and I want students' own interests to determine some of what we do.

My fundamental project (in a book I have just finished) has been to explore the issue of expanding first-order predicate logic to allow non-distributive predication. A predicate F is distributive iff whenever some things are F , each of them is F . Consider:

(1) They are students. They are young.

(2) They are classmates. They are surrounding the building.

The predications in (1) are distributive, but the predications in (2) are non-distributive. Non-distributive plural predication is irreducibly plural. In ordinary first-order logic, only distributive predicates are employed.

The incorporation of irreducibly plural predicates is related to a wide range of issues in metaphysics, philosophy of language, foundations of mathematics, logic, and natural language semantics. Some of the issues that we might consider:

What is the nature of plurality? How should we think of the relations among sets, mereological sums, pluralities and individuals? What (if anything) are these different ontological kinds, and how are they related? Can one thing be many? (Is one deck identical to the 52 cards? Or is this not an identity relation?)

Singular and plural predication; singular and plural quantification; singular and plural reference. How do those fit together? When we consider the full range of determiners in English and try to incorporate quantifiers to represent that, there are many interesting semantic issues to resolve.

How does the semantics of plurality relate to the semantics of mass terms?

In the foundations of mathematics, how far can plurals take us without set theory? What is the relationship of second-order logic to plurals and to the foundations of mathematics?

What is the nature of ontological commitment? What does semantics commit the semanticist to? What does it say speakers are committed to? (For example, if I say that the analysis of adverbs requires an event semantics, does that mean that an ordinary user of adverbs is committed to the existence of events? This kind of issue becomes interesting when we look at the semantics of plurals.)

Can we talk about everything without paradox? Are plurals a special resource to enable us to do so?

A large number of issues about the relationship of semantics and pragmatics come together when we consider definite descriptions. Usually discussions focus on singular definite descriptions, but we can see what difference (if any) it makes when

we insist that the account be general enough for plural and mass definite descriptions. This then also relates to the consideration of pronominal cross-reference and demonstrative reference.

Some have argued that an event semantics is important for getting plurals right. It will be interesting to look at event semantics and how that relates to plurals.

I will meet with each enrolled student early on in the semester to identify some areas of interest and get started on developing the student's presentation and paper on a topic of the student's choice.

If people are interested in looking into this before the semester begins, my book is available on the department's website: <http://philosophy.syr.edu/> (Click on my name in the list of faculty.) Also, Oystein Linnebo has posted a draft of his forthcoming Stanford Encyclopedia article, and it is a good introduction: <http://folk.uio.no/oystein/>. Scroll down to "Plural Quantification."

We will not presume any greater familiarity with logic than you would acquire by being alive and awake through most of PHI 651.

Please get in touch with me if you have questions. tjmckay@syr.edu