

WORDS WITHOUT OBJECTS

Book Abstract

The essay sets itself to resolve the so-called ‘problem of mass nouns’ — a problem which, it is argued, cannot be resolved on the basis of a conventional system of logic. It is not, for instance, possible to explicate assertions of the existence of air or oil or water, through the use of quantifiers and variables which take objectual values. The difficulty is attributable to the semantically distinctive status of non-count nouns — nouns which, although not plural, are nonetheless akin to plural nouns in being semantically non-singular. Standard approaches to understanding non-count nouns are however uniformly reductive, construing them as singular expressions which individuate ‘parcels’ or ‘quantities’ of stuff — set-like entities satisfying the principles of a mereology. And such approaches find a precise parallel in singularised accounts of the semantics of plural nouns, construed as designating collectivities or sets — accounts which, it is urged, are similarly reductive and also false. Metaphysically, there are no distinctive objects in the extensions of plural nouns; their extensions are identical with those of the corresponding singular expressions. Analogously, there are no distinctive objects in the extensions of non-count nouns; but because there are no corresponding singular expressions in these cases, there are no objects in the extensions of non-count nouns at all. There are, in short, no such things as instances of stuff. Metaphysically, non-singular reference in general is an arbitrary modality of reference, ungrounded in the realities to which it is non-ideally or intransparently correlated. The world of space and time contains not merely large numbers of discrete concrete things or individuals of diverse kinds; it also contains large amounts of sheer undifferentiated concrete stuff.

Chapter Abstracts

Chapter 1. Issue is taken with the common assumption that referential expressions and definite descriptions involving ‘mass nouns’ are semantically singular, thereby designating so-called parcels of matter or individual instances of stuff. The trouble is that whereas count nouns are either singular or plural, the so-called mass nouns, because they are non-count, are semantically neither singular nor plural. Russell’s Theory of Descriptions, as well as considerations on persistence, identity and flux, are invoked to reinforce this point.

Chapter 2. The curiously sweeping assumption that all reference is (‘ultimately’) singular — even in the case of plural or non-count reference — is presented and examined. In the case of plural reference, and especially when associated with collective predication, the assumption takes the form of the thought that this is reference to collective entities, plural objects or sets. Perhaps the most suggestive and profound, albeit notorious, idea of this genre is Russell’s doctrine of the ‘class as many’. George Boolos’ explicitly ‘no-class’ approach to the logic of plurality is then compared favourably with ‘reductive’ approaches.

Chapter 3. The second form of the assumption that singular reference is ultimately exhaustive represents non-count reference too as singular — reference to individual ‘quantities’ or ‘parcels’ of stuff. And such ideas are sometimes explicitly advanced on the model of plural reference as singular. These views must however attempt to circumvent the difficulties generated by Russell’s account of the necessary conditions for denoting expressions to be counted as semantically singular. But the attempts do not, so it is argued, succeed.

Chapter 4. The focus now switches from reference and denoting to quantification, as it figures in standard versions of the predicate calculus. These versions are straightforwardly reductive, in that non-singular sentences must be re-cast into singular form if they are to receive representation. But various non-singular constructions, including plural sentences, are refractory to representation in this form. Singular and non-singular forms of quantifier-expression are identified and distinguished, and alternative non-singular forms of quantification, for both plural nouns and non-count nouns, are proposed. The maxim ‘to be is to be the value of a variable’ is rejected.

Chapter 5. The notion of an ‘ideal language’ or ‘concept-script’ is explicated and defended, and constraints upon formal systems imposed by the ideal of transparency are explored. It is urged that, ironically, non-singular symbolism, including non-singular variables, largely fail to satisfy such constraints. In general, the semantics of non-singular expressions do not transparently reflect the corresponding ontic categories. The conditions for the possibility of transparent non-singular assertions, freed from the concept of identity, are briefly explored. Finally, the questionable role within philosophy of the ‘Classical’ Weltanschauung is highlighted.

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.daneprairie.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.