

The ontology of dual aspect nouns

Alexandra Arapinis
IHPST Paris

Among the various sorts of metonymy that have been studied in the literature, I will focus on the particular case of dual aspect nouns like ‘book’, ‘school’, ‘lunch’ etc. What is particularly interesting about them is that their polysemic behaviour appears to reflect the different ontological “aspects” making up the denoted entity. More importantly, though constitutive of a unified denotational entity, these aspects appear to have incompatible conditions of identity and individuation. Thus, any particular book is in a sense made up of an informational abstract content and a physical support; a lunch is an event that unfolds through time, but is also made up of edible stuff; a school is an abstract institution, but is also constituted of humans like teachers and students, and is most of the time located in a given building, etc. Now, all these phenomena have recently been analysed by computational linguists like Pustejovsky (1995) and Asher (2011) by means of a new sort of complex lexical types, viz. dot-types, made out of a number of simple disjoint types corresponding to each aspect of the denoted entity.

The issue is that, though such dot-types have proven very helpful in handling dual aspect nouns in a formal semantic framework, they are nevertheless conceptually puzzling and in need of further explanation and justification. Focussing on the particular case of institutional dual aspect nouns (e.g. ‘church’, ‘school’, ‘bank’, etc.), I will argue that looking at the ontology of the denoted entities can help attain a better conceptual grasp of such complex types. I will thus take a brief philosophical incursion into institutional ontology to introduce the notion of an ontologically stratified entity, viz. an entity that depends on, is grounded in, heterogeneous ontological strata. As I will argue, the polysemic behaviour of dual aspect nouns reflects the stratified nature of the denoted entity, while the “dot” is a generic way of pinning the various ontological dependence relations cementing heterogeneous strata into a unified whole. Beyond the conceptual interest of adopting such an ontological prism, I will further show that ontological insights are crucial for solving a number of open co-predication puzzles.