

'TABLE SIX LEFT WITHOUT PAYING'¹

Wylie Breckenridge

Draft: 13th November 2006

0. Introduction

Imagine a waiter using the sentence in (1) below to mean that the man on table six left without paying.

(1) Table six left without paying.

I assume that this is something he can do. This is not to assume that (1) itself means that the man on table six left without paying (I take it that it does not) – we often use a sentence to mean something that the sentence itself does not mean. If (1) does not mean that the man on table six left without paying, then perhaps the waiter cannot use (1) to *say* that the man on table six left without paying, but I assume that this is at least something that he might mean.

My interest in this paper is in the following question: What does the waiter mean by 'table six' (on this occasion)?²

There are at least three things that we might say:

- (2) a. By 'table six' the waiter means the man on table six (a man), but not table six (the table).
b. By 'table six' the waiter means table six (the table), but not the man on table six (a man).
c. By 'table six' the waiter means both.

It is very natural to think that by 'table six' the waiter at least means the man on table six. One piece of evidence is that the waiter might clarify what he means by following his utterance of (1) with an utterance of (3):

(3) By 'table six' I mean the man on table six.

If by 'table six' the waiter does indeed mean the man on table six, then it follows that (2b) is false, and that either (2a) or (2c) is true.

But this intuition can be challenged. An alternative possibility is that it is not by 'table six' that the waiter means the man on table six, but by a more complex expression constituted by 'table six' and other aphonic material. Call this expression 'table six'⁺. Perhaps 'table six'⁺ contains a free variable '*f*' which, in context, is assigned a function from individuals to individuals. When the waiter utters (1), '*f*' is assigned a function which maps table six to the man on table six. If this is right, then we might represent the structure of (1) more perspicuously as follows:

¹ Thanks to Ofra Magidor and Stephen Kearns.

² There is no particular reason why I have chosen to discuss (1) in this paper. The waiter's use of 'table six' in (1) is, I believe, representative of the way in which we use a great many expressions in English, and I intend the conclusions that I draw here to be general.

(4) [f [Table six]] left without paying.

If it is true that the subject of (1) is not ‘table six’, but a distinct and more complex expression ‘table six’⁺, then I take it that (2b) is the correct answer – by ‘table six’ the waiter means table six (the table), and it is by ‘table six’⁺ and not by ‘table six’ that he means the man on table six. Why might the waiter use (3) above to clarify what he means by ‘table six’? Answers can be given: perhaps because he mistakenly thinks that it is by ‘table six’ that he means the man on table six (it does, after all, have the same surface form as ‘table six’⁺), or perhaps by “ ‘table six’ ” he means “ ‘table six’⁺ ” (in which case his clarification is correct).

I want to set aside this possibility for now. My interest is in what we should say if there is no aphonic material in the subject of (1) – if the subject of (1) is just the expression ‘table six’. I take it that this rules out answer (2b), and leaves us to choose between (2a) and (2c). Which of (2a) and (2c) should we say?

I think that we should say (2c) – that by ‘table six’ the waiter means *both* table six *and* the man on table six.

I find that most people are comfortable with the idea that by ‘table six’ the waiter means the man on table six, but I find that many are *not* comfortable with the idea that he also means table six. In Section 1, I provide two arguments for why he means table six by ‘table six’; in Section 2, I try to allay various concerns that one might have with this; in Section 3, I make some concluding remarks.

1. Two Arguments

I shall now present two arguments for why the waiter means table six by ‘table six’.

First argument

The first argument comes from considering how the waiter himself might clarify what he means by ‘table six’. As I mentioned above, it would be natural for him to clarify what he means by ‘table six’ by following up his utterance of (1) with an utterance of (4), which is evidence that by ‘table six’ he means the man on table six. Call this *evidence from testimony*. It would *not* be natural for him to follow up with an utterance of (5a) below, so we cannot use it to provide evidence from testimony that by ‘table six’ he means table six. But nor can we use it to provide evidence that he does not. After all, it would not be natural for him to follow up with an utterance of (5b) either, and that is no reason to think that by ‘paying’ he does not mean paying.

- (5) a. By ‘table six’ I mean table six.
- b. By ‘paying’ I mean paying.

But we can get evidence from testimony by embellishing the story. Imagine that there is more than one table six in the waiter’s café, one of which is red, the other of which is green. Concerned that he might be misunderstood, the waiter follows up his utterance of (1) with an utterance of (6):

(6) By ‘table six’ I mean the *red* table six.

If the waiter is right about this – that by ‘table six’ he means the red table six – then it follows that by ‘table six’ he means table six (the red one). Of course, the waiter might not be right, but the fact he judges himself to mean table six by ‘table six’ is at least evidence that he does. It is at least as good evidence as the fact that he might clarify what he means by ‘table six’ by following up with (4) above is evidence that by ‘table six’ he means the man on table six (which most people take to be very good).³

Second argument

The second argument comes from considering how the waiter might use anaphora. Imagine the waiter following his utterance of (1) with an utterance of the following sentence:

(7) So did the table next to it.⁴

The key fact to which I shall appeal is that the waiter can reasonably expect his audience to understand that by ‘it’ in (7) he means table six. I propose that this is because he uses ‘table six’ in (1) to mean table six. If this explanation is right, then it follows that he uses ‘table six’ to mean table six.

I can think of two alternative explanations, but I think that each is inadequate. The first goes as follows: The waiter used ‘table six’ to mean the man on table six, and since that man is on table six, the waiter can reasonably expect his audience to understand that by ‘it’ in (7) he means table six.

But suppose that instead of using ‘table six’ to mean table six, the waiter uses ‘John’ instead (suppose that’s the name of the man on table six). That is, suppose that the waiter uses the first sentence in (8) below instead. And suppose that he follows it up in the same way, by uttering the second sentence in (8).

(8) John left without paying. So did the table next to it.

There might be contexts in which it is just as reasonable for the waiter to expect his audience to understand that by ‘it’ in (8) he means table six. But there are certainly contexts in which it is not. Imagine, for example, that the waiter is talking to someone on the phone who knows who John is but does not know where John was sitting. Then it is unreasonable of the waiter to expect his conversant to understand that by ‘it’ in (8) he means table six. But had the waiter in this case used ‘table six’ instead of ‘John’ it would *still* have been reasonable of him to expect his conversant to understand that by ‘it’ he meant table six. The present proposal cannot explain this difference between using ‘John’ and using ‘table six’. According to the proposal, it is reasonable of the waiter to expect his audience to understand that by ‘it’ he means table six, because by

³ Objection to discuss: “By ‘table six’ do you mean table six, or the man on table six? I mean the man on table six.” My explanation: The question is understood to be one about what the waiter *ultimately* means by ‘table six’. I discuss the notion of what is ultimately meant in Section 2.

⁴ To discuss: It seems that both table six and the man on table six are available for anaphoric reference – “Table six left without paying. I won’t clean it until he comes back.”

‘table six’ he means a man who is on table six; but this also true of the case in which he uses ‘John’ instead – by ‘John’ he means a man who is on table six. So according to the proposal his expectations ought to be equally reasonable. But they are not, so the proposal is inadequate.

The second alternative explanation goes as follows: The waiter can reasonably expect his audience to understand that by ‘it’ he means table six, because he used an expression that means table six (he didn’t use it to mean table six – rather, the expression itself means table six).

I think that this explanation is also inadequate. It is false that ‘table six’ means table six (that particular table). It can be used to mean many other table sixes as well, consistent with what it itself means. If ‘table six’ means table six (that particular table), then we could not, consistently with what it means, use it to mean other tables; but we can, so ‘table six’ does not mean table six (that particular table). So this explanation is inadequate. But perhaps it can be improved. Perhaps we should say, not that the waiter used an expression that means table six, but one that *can* be used to mean table six (that particular table). It is true that the expression that the waiter used, ‘table six’, can be used to mean table six (that particular table). But it can be used to mean other tables as well. So the account owes us an explanation of why it is reasonable for the waiter to expect his audience to understand that by ‘it’ he means *that particular* table (rather than any other of the various tables that ‘table six’ can be used to mean). The natural answer is: because he uses it to mean *that particular* table. But that would be just to concede my point – that the waiter uses it to mean table six (that particular table). I can see no way to fix the present proposal without conceding that the waiter uses ‘table six’ to mean table six. I conclude that this second proposed explanation is also inadequate.

2. Concerns

Having given two arguments that by ‘table six’ the waiter means table six, I shall now try to allay some possible concerns about the waiter using ‘table six’ to mean both table six and the man on table six.

Perhaps one concern is something that results from misunderstanding the claim in (2c). The claim is that table six and the man on table six are both things that the waiter *means* by ‘table six’, not that they are both things that he *refers to* or *talks about*. I think that the waiter uses ‘table six’ to mean table six, but I do not think that he uses it to refer to or talk about table six. I take it that meaning something is not the same thing as referring to or talking about it, and that one can do the former without doing either of the latter. I might use ‘grass is green’ to mean that grass is green, without referring to or talking about whatever it is that I mean (a proposition, say). The claim in (2c) is just that by ‘table six’ the waiter *means* both table six and the man on table six.

Perhaps another concern is that using a word to mean two distinct things is not the kind of thing that we can do. But I don’t see why we should think that. It is a general fact about usage that we can use something to do two distinct things (with the one use). I might use a button to explode a bomb and thereby explode a dam, thus using the button to explode both the bomb and the dam (with the one use). I might use a match to light some paper and thereby light a bonfire, thus using the match to light both the paper and the bonfire (with the one use). I might use a noise to frighten one person and thereby

frighten a crowd, thus using the noise to frighten both the person and the crowd (with the one use). I don't see any relevant difference between using buttons to explode things, using matches to light things, using noises to frighten things, and using words to mean things. If there is no relevant difference, then we ought not be surprised to find that a speaker can use an expression to mean two distinct things (with the one use). In particular, I see no reason to think that meaning both table six and the man on table six by 'table six' is not the kind of thing that the waiter can do.

One concern that I have heard is that (2c) claims ambiguity where there is none. But again I think that this is to misunderstand what (2c) claims. The claim is not that the expression 'table six' itself has two meanings. The claim is that 'table six' is used by the waiter to mean two things. So (2c) is not committed to there being an ambiguity in 'table six'. Nor is it committed to there being an ambiguity in what the waiter means by 'table six'. It is not the case that there are two possible interpretations of what the waiter means by 'table six', one of which is correct, the other of which is incorrect. According to (2c), there are two things that the waiter means by 'table six', and his audience must understand that he means both – they do not have to decide between the two. So (2c) is not committed to there being any ambiguity in what 'table six' means, nor in what the waiter uses it to mean.

Another concern that I have heard is that (2c), when coupled with compositionality, predicts that the waiter means something by the sentence that in fact he does not. As I understand it, the concern is this: What the waiter means by the sentence is a function of what he means by 'table six', what he means by 'left without paying', and the way they are syntactically combined; if one of the things that the waiter means by 'table six' is table six, then one of the things that he means by the sentence is that table six left without paying (i.e. the table got up and walked out); but this is not something that the waiter means by the sentence, so he does not mean table six by 'table six'.

I agree that by (1) the waiter does not mean that table six (the table) left without paying. I take it that the following possible conversation is good evidence for this:

- (9) A: Table six left without paying.
B: No it didn't, it's still there.
A: That's not what I meant – I didn't mean that *the table* left without paying.

I think that what these considerations show is not that the waiter does not mean table six by 'table six', but that we need to be more careful in how we formulate the principle of compositionality, as it applies to what speakers mean. Let me introduce some terminology – let's say that although by 'table six' the waiter meant both table six and the man on table six, what he *ultimately* meant by 'table six' was the man on table six. Then we can formulate compositionality, at least in the present case, as follows: What the waiter means by the sentence is a function of what he *ultimately* means by 'table six', what he *ultimately* means by 'left without paying', and the way they are syntactically combined. Then there is no prediction that by (1) the waiter means that table six (the table) left without paying.

This might seem like an *ad hoc* manoeuvre, but I do not think that it is. Something very much like it is needed if we are to carefully formulate the principle of compositionality for sentences (rather than what speakers mean by them). The principle is usually stated

in something like the following way: the meaning of a sentence is a function of the meaning of its constituents and the way in which they are syntactically combined. But this needs to be tidied up. Consider the sentence, ‘The man on table six left without paying’. Among its constituents are the expressions ‘table six’, and ‘the man on table six’. But we do not want to say that the meaning of the sentence is obtained compositionally from (among others) *these* two constituents – since the former is a constituent of the latter, its meaning helps determine the meaning of the latter, and is not then needed in addition to the latter to help determine the meaning of the sentence. What this shows is that we need to be more careful about the formulation of the principle of compositionality for sentences. One natural suggestion is this: the meaning of a sentence is a function of the meaning of its *immediate* constituents and the way in which they are syntactically combined. The point here is that to correctly formulate this principle it is natural to appeal to a notion of what the *immediate* constituents of a sentence are. I propose that appealing to a notion of what a speaker *ultimately* means by an expression is no more *ad hoc* than this.

3. Concluding Remarks

I think that we should take seriously the idea that by ‘table six’ the waiter means both table six, and the man on table six. And I think that we should take seriously the idea that this is the kind of thing that we very often do – that we very often mean more than one thing by the one use of a linguistic expression. What I have said about the waiter’s use of ‘table six’ in (1) can be said about our use of many other expressions. In can be said, I believe, about our use of words that result from *conversion*. Here are a few examples:

- (10) a. John needed some cash so he went to cash a cheque.
b. John likes to run so he went for a run.
c. Mary is already pretty – she doesn’t need to pretty herself.

According to the traditional way of thinking about word conversion, in (10a) there are two distinct words ‘cash’ with distinct but related meanings. The first ‘cash’ is a noun, and means a certain kind of currency; the second ‘cash’ is a verb, and means a certain kind of event – an event in which something is exchanged for cash (the currency). As opposed to this, I think that the first and second ‘cash’s in (10a) are the same word, and it means cash, the currency. But when we use this word in verb position, we mean two things by it – both cash (the currency), and exchange for cash (the event). The arguments that I have given for why the waiter uses ‘table six’ to mean both table six and the man on table six can be modified into arguments for why we use ‘cash’ in verb position to mean both cash (the currency) and exchange for cash. And what I have said about the concerns one might have with the former idea, can equally be said about the concerns one might have with the latter.

In the long run, I suspect that by taking seriously the idea that we can use the one expression to mean two distinct things will free us to more successfully develop compositional semantics for natural language constructions.