INTENTIONALISM OUT OF CONTROL

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Suppose I say, 'That is my dog' and manage to refer to my dog, Fido. According to intentionalism, my intention to refer to Fido is part of the explanation of the way that the demonstrative gets Fido as its referent. A natural corollary is that the speaker is, to some extent, in control of this semantic fact. In this paper, we argue that intentionalism must give up the claim that the speaker is always in control, and thus, that intentions are always the mental states that do the semantic work: we provide new examples where reference is successful but the speaker either lacks the intention to refer, or does not know how to refer; in all of these cases, the speaker is not in control of reference. We argue that these cases provide better objections against classical intentionalism than the ones offered by conventionalists (for example, Stojnić *et al.* 2013; Stojnić 2021) and also that our discussion has as notable consequence that referring is not an essentially intentional action. Finally, we put forward our own view, which gives up claims of control but retains from intentionalism the importance of the speaker's mental states.

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1. Introduction

A popular family of views about the referential mechanism of demonstratives claims that the speaker's intentions play a role in determining the referent on an occasion of use. Within this family there are many disagreements about that role: do the speaker's intentions suffice? Do the mental states of the *actual* audience matter? Or maybe the *ideal* audience, which is guaranteed to pay attention to the speaker, to successfully keep track of the conversation, to be fully rational, etc.? But all these views agree that on any particular occasion, if a demonstrative refers to something, it is partly because the speaker intended to refer to that thing, and partly because other conditions, if any, have been met (for various forms of intentionalism, see Kaplan 1989; Bach 1992; Reimer 1992; Siegel 2002; Stokke 2010; King 2014; Speaks 2016; Lewerentz and Marschall 2018; O'Rourke 2019; Radulescu 2019; Viebahn 2020; Devitt 2021; Michaelson 2021; Unnsteinsson 2022).

Since the intra-familial discussion has focused on these other conditions, less attention has been paid to an apparent consequence of this view: that if the conditions are met, so that the speaker's intention directly determines the referent, then the speaker ends up intentionally referring to that thing. On the widespread assumption that intentional action requires control, it also follows that in those cases, the speaker is *in control of both* what they refer to, *and* of what the demonstrative refers to.

Recently, opponents of intentionalism have provided cases that we would describe as the speaker lacking control, where reference allegedly happens against, and independently of, the speaker's intentions (Stojnić *et al.* 2013; Stojnić 2021). They have argued on this basis that intentionalism is false. In §3, we discuss one such case, and we argue that it fails to prove intentionalism false—that it is a case where reference simply does not occur. This kind of case fails because it does not factor in

the tight connection between action theory and intentionalism, where the latter requires that the semantics of demonstratives be connected to talk of the referent of a given demonstrative as used by a particular speaker.

But the connection to action theory can be used against intentionalism in other ways. In §4, we offer two different kinds of cases, similar to ones discussed in action theory, where reference occurs either without the speaker's know-how or without the speaker's intention to refer to the eventual referent. In §5, we defend our cases against possible objections.

In §6, we argue that intentionalism must and can be reformulated to allow for these cases. We argue that the central feature of intentionalism must be the claim that the referential mechanism of demonstratives depends on the speaker's mental states, but intentions to refer alone fail to secure referential control, and that the mental states required for securing control are sometimes more complicated than—and different from—the intention to refer.

2. Preliminaries

The main target of our discussion in the next section is *conventionalism* about the semantics of demonstratives—that is, the view that the referent of demonstratives is not determined by the speaker's referential intentions, or any of their mental states, but by the set of linguistic rules governing their use, and the way they apply to the context of use. These rules do not take the speaker's mental states as input, and thus referring with a demonstrative (or with any expression) is completely out of the speaker's control.

The opposite view is *intentionalism* about the semantics of demonstratives: the view that the referents of demonstratives are determined at least in part by the speaker's intentions, who thus have control over reference. There are two varieties of intentionalism: *strong intentionalism* claims that, since there are no further

conditions, the speaker's intentions directly determine the referent and the speaker's control is absolute (for example, Kaplan 1989 and Radulescu 2019). The disagreement with conventionalism about control and about the role of mental states is obvious here. *Moderate intentionalism* claims that since there are some non-trivial conditions, the speaker is not completely in control: whether these conditions are met may depend on the audience's beliefs, or on linguistic conventions, or on conventions about gestures, etc (for example, King 2014 and Michaelson 2021).[2] So, the relevant notion of control for the moderate intentionalist is a conditional one: if the speaker's intentions pass the triage set up by the conditions, the speaker has absolute control over reference determination, and we again arrive at a disagreement with conventionalism.[3]

Before we talk about arguments for these views, we want to point out that there is conceptual space between intentionalism and conventionalism. Since our view occupies that space, we think it important to first argue that this space exists, and then to argue that it is where the truth lies. Intentionalism, as we have defined it, is a conjunction of two views: (a) that the speaker's mental states (specifically, their intentions) are relevant to the semantics of demonstratives, and (b) that the speaker has some at-least-conditional control over the referents of demonstratives. The second conjunct is typically left implicit, probably because it seems to be entailed by the first: if intentions work, then it is the speaker's doing; and that doing is just a realisation of their intentions, and hence within their control. We will

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[2]Other labels have been used in the literature: Stokke 2010 calls this 'weak intentionalism'.
[3]For explicitly linking intentionalism about context sensitive expressions to control of content, while not necessarily endorsing the view, see Biro 1982: 35; Bach 1992: 142; Mount 2008: 203; Romdenh-Romluc 2008: 153; Montminy 2010: 2916; Mount 2015: 13; Leth 2020: 87; Unnsteinsson 2022: ch. 3. Not all intentionalists believe that speakers have control over reference. In fact, intentionalists often do not talk about control at all. We are talking about a conjunction of views that has seemed natural to many, and that, we argue, is false. Other kinds of intentionalisms have also been connected to control. Thus, one of the foundational anti-intentionalist texts in aesthetics says that '[t]he poem is the critic's own and not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it)'. (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946: 470)

argue that speakers sometimes lack control over reference. Suppose that you agree with our soon-to-be-presented arguments. Does this entail that conventionalism is true?

We think not: conventionalism is also a conjunction of two views, both the negations of the views that make up intentionalism. Conventionalism claims (c) that the speaker's intentions are irrelevant for the semantics of demonstratives, and (d) that the speaker is not in control of what demonstratives refer to. We agree with the second conjunct. But we do not agree with the first conjunct: we will argue that the speaker's specific referring intentions are indeed relevant, even if they do not give the speaker control over reference. We think this intermediate view deserves to be called 'intentionalism', or, better, 'modest intentionalism'. We think that the core intentionalist claim is about the role of the speaker's mental states in reference determination, and we agree with this claim. In most cases, it is true that the speaker thus has some at-least-conditional control over reference, but even in cases where they do not, the speaker's mental states still remain relevant for semantics.

3.   Motivations and Problems for Conventionalism

According to conventionalism, a speaker's specific referential intentions are irrelevant for determining the reference of demonstratives—the determination of reference is entirely due to the linguistic rules governing the use of demonstratives together with various features of the context of utterance. Because the set of linguistic rules and a speaker's intentions might come apart, it follows that, according to conventionalism, reference can be determined completely independently of the speaker's referential intentions. Moreover, because reference is determined by the set of linguistic rules and the context, independently of the speaker's intentions, assuming that the speaker has no full control over such a set of rules or over the mechanism whereby these rules determine reference in a context, the speaker should be expected to have no full control over the

determination of demonstrative referents and to sometimes have no control whatsoever. Hence, a general strategy on behalf of conventionalism about demonstrative reference has been to appeal to cases where reference is out of the speaker's control as well as to cases illustrating how reference determination and intentions to refer can come apart. As a case motivating a conventionalist view of this sort, consider Stojnić *et al.* (2013: 508)'s case of the stuck arm:

> **Stuck Arm** Consider a speaker who intends to refer to Ann, but her hand becomes suddenly stuck, and so, she accidentally points at Sue, while uttering, "She is happy". It would be odd to say she intended to refer to Sue, or indeed, anything in the general direction of her pointing gesture. Quite clearly, though, intuitively, it is Sue, not Ann, who is the referent of "she". After all, the audience can follow up her utterance with "So, you are saying Sue is happy" and can challenge her with "That is false. Sue is not happy at all". [...] The speaker cannot felicitously deny she said Sue is happy (or claim she said Ann is happy).

In this example, 'she' is described as referring to Sue, in virtue of the speaker accidentally pointing to Sue, even though the speaker clearly did not intend to refer to Sue. Moreover, the mechanism of reference determination is completely out of the speaker's control, since it is just an accident that the speaker's hand ends up pointing to Sue (for another similar case, see Stojnić 2021: 54). Stojnić *et al.* go on to claim that examples such as these show that intentions to refer are irrelevant to determining reference (Stojnić *et al.* 2013: 508–9).

We think that these sorts of examples are not well-chosen on behalf of conventionalism. It is striking that in **Stuck Arm**, Stojnić *et al.* (2013) presume that reference can happen *even in the absence of a referential act.* In **Stuck Arm**, the speaker's demonstration or pointing allegedly happens completely fortuitously, as it happens only because the speaker's arm gets stuck. And one's arm getting stuck

is not an *action* that the speaker performs; rather it is something that *merely* happens to the speaker. However, it is a basic point in action theory that mere happenings are not actions. If the arm getting stuck is not an action, one might wonder whether any act of pointing or demonstrating by the speaker is actually taking place. To strengthen this point, actions differ from mere happenings in that they are intentional under *some* description (Davidson 1971); but there does not seem to be any description under which the speaker's bodily movement of getting stuck is intentional. Hence, it is really unclear that any act of pointing obtains in virtue of the speaker's arm getting stuck in **Stuck Arm**.

So, the question arises as to whether one is entitled to describe the result of the speaker's arm getting stuck as an act of pointing or an act of referring—that is, as an action, rather than as something that merely happens to the speaker. This worry percolates from the act of demonstrating to the act of saying. Stojnić *et al.* (2013: 505) take demonstrations to be 'a grammaticized constituent of the speaker's utterance'. Granting to Stojnić *et al.* (2013) that the demonstration is constitutive of the speaker's act of saying whenever the utterance involves a demonstrative expression, since the pointing in **Stuck Arm** is not agential, there are independent reasons to doubt that the speaker is actually succeeding in the act of saying *anything* in this scenario. Hence, on the plausible assumption that successful reference is present only with acts of saying, there are independent action-theoretical reasons to doubt that reference is at all successful in this case.

One cannot simply retort that reference determination *can* happen in the absence of the speaker doing things such as saying, pointing, or referring, for this line of response risks overgenerating cases of reference. If we allow reference without an act of referring, then the proverbial ants on the beach that happen to form a shape that looks like 'this' would count as referring, or that it would count as referring if it also happens to be accompanied by a flock of birds whose shape looks like an arrow

(Radulescu 2019). Similar points can be made by looking at cases of mere reflexes. Consider a subject with a condition such that they keep emitting the noise 'she' as a reflex whenever Sue appears. No reference to Sue is taking place, and that is so precisely because no utterance is taking place—the subject is not actually doing anything, just undergoing a reflex conditioned by the presence of a stimulus. Similarly, if one were coerced to position one's arm as if one were pointing in the direction of Sue and to pronounce the sound 'she', it is equally unclear that they would be saying or referring to anything. What is common to all of these examples is that the subjects are not performing an action (of saying or of referring), and successful reference is doubtful precisely because of this. But, in all of these cases, the conventionalist would have to say that, just like in **Stuck Arm**, reference takes place. This consequence is undesirable. For it is one thing to claim, as conventionalists do, that speaker's reference and semantic reference come apart; it is quite another to abandon the (plausible) assumption that a demonstrative expression can refer to something only if the speaker is using it in *an act of reference*.

In conclusion, the conventionalist is better advised not to rely on non-agential cases to motivate their view. And yet one might think that the general strategy of establishing conventionalism by looking at cases where control is absent is nonetheless on the right track. After all, control can also be absent in agential cases—that is, in cases where the agent is performing an act. It is a widely assumed point in action theory that not every action is under the control of the agent. According to many action theorists, this follows from the more general point that not every action is intentional, and that actions can fail to be intentional when they are not under the control of the agent. And even those action theorists that do not take control to be necessary for intentional action will agree that actions are not necessarily controlled.

So a better strategy on behalf of conventionalism and against intentionalism is to look at cases of reference determination which differ from cases such as **Stuck Arm** in that it is largely uncontroversial that the speaker *does* say or refer, but in which cases, because of their lack of control, the resulting saying or reference is not controlled. With this in mind, in the next section, we consider cases of reference that fit this description. Ultimately, we think intentionalism can overcome this challenge, though doing so will lead to a reformulation of intentionalism as standardly conceived.

4. New Cases of Reference without Control

Referring to a particular individual is something that an agent does—it is an act of sort. Indeed, in speech act theory, reference is deemed a 'propositional act' (rather than, for example, an illocutionary act. See Searle 1965; Garcia-Carpintero 2000; Hanks 2019). As an act, it can be controlled or non-controlled. In the following, we propose cases where reference-determination can happen *without* the speaker's control *over the act of referring to a particular individual*. But referring is different from reference-determination. Thus, lack of control over referring does not obviously entail lack of control over reference-determination. Nonetheless, *if* we can show that reference-determination can happen without the speaker's control *over the act of referring*, it is a short step to the conclusion that reference-determination can happen without a speaker's control *over the mechanism of reference-determination*. After all, presumably referential intentions do not just determine reference *by magic*; rather, they determine reference by being realised *through* acts of reference, via a causal story that goes like this: a speaker intends to use a demonstrative token to refer to X, and this intention is realised by the act of referring to X, which is a spatio-temporally located event that contains the referent X as its part. Now, if referential intentions can determine reference only through an act of reference as described, it follows that the

reference-determination cannot be under the speaker's control if the act of reference is not under the speaker's control. Then, by showing that reference-determination can happen without the speaker's control over the act of reference, we will have shown, against both strong and moderate intentionalisms, that reference-determination can happen without the speaker's control over the mechanism of reference-determination.

Let us briefly explain our methodology. In each case, we will present both the relevant easily observable elements of the scenario (what words are used, what the speaker is doing at the time, etc.), and facts about the speaker's state of mind. In the words of Donnellan (1974), we—the case presenters—are talking from the point of view of the omniscient observer, and we are asking for intuitions from that point of view. The intentionalist can challenge this approach by claiming that successful reference, at least when used in a communicative act, is to be understood in the context of successful communication. Such a view is naturally combined with a mind-reading of reference and intention recognition. This perspective excludes the omniscient observer's point of view as irrelevant, since, unlike us, such an observer does not need any mind-reading. Our intuitions, the challenge continues, must be based on facts that the audience has access to.

We have two main reasons to cling to the omniscient point of view approach. First, there is a tradition of accounting for reference in terms of the omniscient observer's point of view. While a defence of that tradition is beyond the scope of this paper, the rationale beyond this tradition is that there is an interesting notion of reference that pins down an objective relation, one that holds between words and referents independently of the speaker or hearer's handle on it. For a well-known version of it, consider Kripke's view that reference can be secured by a historical chain of word-transmission. Neither the speaker nor the hearer are guaranteed to know to

whom that chain goes back, and Kripke is talking from the perspective of the omniscient observer.[4]

Second, our cases are supposed to elicit intuitions about reference as well as about control and intentionality; the latter are connected to normative considerations, such as the possibility of assigning *credit*. While we will not discuss any normative features of our cases—doing so would bring us too far afield—the third-person perspective is needed for attributions of credit. The omniscient observer is right for the job, and that is a further reason why we ask the reader to take on that very perspective.

In order to introduce our cases, it is helpful to review examples that action theorists take to illustrate the possibility of *non-controlled actions*. Many non-controlled actions are *actions*—rather than mere happenings, since the agent has a standing intention which the action realises—which, however, are not under the control of the agent.

One classical kind of case in which an intended action might be non-controlled is that it happens through **deviant causal chains**. We bracket deviant causal chains here, however, since we believe the most persuasive examples of non-controlled referring do not involve deviant causal chains.[5] The second class of cases in which an action is intended but nonetheless non-controlled are so-called **lucky successes**.

[4] While this kind of view is arguably found in Kripke 1980, other passages are less than clear on the topic. See also Stalnaker 2004; Almog 2005; Kaplan 2012.

[5] For a classic example of this sort of deviance, consider Chisholm (1966)'s case of the **Murderous Nephew**, where a nephew intends to kill his uncle in order to inherit his fortune. He drives to his uncle's house and on the way he kills by accident a pedestrian, who turned out to be his uncle. In this scenario, the nephew's killing is not intentional. In light of cases such as **Murderous Nephew**, it is widely believed in action theory that an action is controlled only if it happens in accordance with the agent's plans. Can there be cases of non-controlled demonstrative reference which involve deviant causal chains? A case of this sort might have the following structure: the speaker's intention to refer to an individual is implemented by a plan, which involves pointing to an individual who satisfies a certain perceptual description, but in which the intention is realised not in accordance with this plan. It is unclear to us that there are genuine cases of reference that satisfy this description.

A novice at snookers aims to send a coloured ball into the left potting from an angle that would be challenging for the most expert snooker player; but as they hit the cue ball, the stick slides and strikes the ball so that it somehow ends up entering the left potting. What luck! It was not intentional since the success was due to luck rather than to the relevant skills. Similarly, if you are not a skilled lock thief, and you open a locker by dialling a random code into it, your action is too accidental to count as intentional (Mele and Moser 1994; Pavese and Beddor 2023). This sort of luck is known as 'beginner's luck' and is widely thought in action theory to be incompatible with intentional action, even in cases the performance happens non-deviantly and in accordance with the (however naïve) plans of the agent (for example, Bratman 1984; Mele and Moser 1994; Malle and Knobe 1997: 109; Pavese *et al* 2023). Another class of lucky success are *lottery cases*. Consider somebody who is irrationally confident that they will win a fair lottery and who intends to win it by buying a ticket at the local grocery store; even if they are lucky enough to win, their success is clearly not controlled (for example, Malle and Knobe 1997; Gibbons 2001).

Action theorists deem these kinds of cases non-intentional because the subjects in question fail to possess *control* over their actions, as with the previously considered cases of causal deviance. However, these cases differ strikingly from deviant causal chains cases, since the lack of control here does not have to do with the action not happening in accordance with the agent's plans. In these cases, the action might happen in accordance with plans of the agent, and yet it is too lucky to count as non-intentional. The lack of control can have different sources, but often, it is due to a lack or deficiency in the agent's know-how or skill (for example, Bratman 1984; Mele and Moser 1994; Malle and Knobe 1997; Pavese *et al.* 2023; Pavese and Henne 2023). For example, the novice's success at pool is too lucky to count as intentional because they do not have the relevant skill; similarly, nobody presumably knows how to win a fair lottery. What these lucky successes suggest is that even intended

actions might fail to be intentional/within the control of the agent if the agent fails to know how to perform it. Accordance with one's plan, together with skill, seems to provide plausible anti-luck conditions necessary for control and intentionality.

With these preliminaries in place, we can move on to cases of non-deviant but nonetheless *non-controlled referring*. These are cases where the agent succeeds at referring using a demonstrative expression but in which the speaker is not in control of their referring because they lack the requisite skill. As a first case, consider:

> **Case #1 No confidence, no know-how**
>
> Mariya was born in Ukraine and has only started learning English since moving to the USA. Her English skills are very poor. She would like to complain to the house administrator about her new neighbour Davis, whose name she has not learned yet, for his habit of listening to music late at night. When the administrator finally makes an appearance in the building courtyard, as she sees Davis not too distant from her, she intends to single him out to the administrator; but she cannot recall whether 'dada', 'that', or 'dodo' is the right word to refer to proximal individuals in English; she randomly choose 'that', with no confidence that she is choosing the right word.

In **Case #1**, it is most plausible that by using 'that' in front of Davis, she successfully refers to Davis—Davis is certainly whom she wanted to talk about; moreover, her use of the word 'that' is not a mere happening: she chooses the word, albeit randomly, among some alternatives and she definitely intends to use 'that' to refer to Davis when talking with the house manager. Thus, plausibly, Mariya is performing an act of reference with her use of 'that'. However, she did not *intentionally* refer to Davis with her use of 'that'. After all, she does not know how to refer with a demonstrative in English; she just *guessed*. In both respects, Mariya's

performance is not that different from the novice hitting triple hits at the first try. Just like the case of beginner's luck, the know-how is lacking. No control, no intentional action; no know-how, no control.[6]

Hence, we have a *prima facie* case of successful reference in absence of the speaker's control. One striking feature of **Case #1** is that it is not even a clear case of intended action, let alone of controlled action. As described, while Mariya has the intention to talk about Davis, Mariya has no belief nor confidence that she will succeed at referring to Davis. If so, how could she intend to refer to him? Many action theorists impose a belief requirement on intentions (for example, Hampshire and Hart 1969; Grice 1971; Harman 1976, 1986; Marušić and Schwenkler 2018); others at least require that one has some degree of confidence or partial beliefs for intending to act (Holton 2008; Setiya 2012). If a belief or at least some degree of confidence is necessary for one to have an (at least partial) intention, then **Case #1** is not obviously a case of intended referring.[7]

However, the lack of intention is not necessary for unintentional referring. Consider a variant of **Case #1** that more closely mirrors the lottery case considered above. Recall that in the lottery case, the player does have some confidence, albeit irrational, of winning the fair lottery. So let us consider a variant of **Case #1**, where Mariya does have a strong, albeit irrational, degree of confidence in her possibility of success, even though she lacks full competence in English. Let us call this variant **Case #2.** In **Case #2**, it is most plausible that by using 'that' in front of Davis, Mariya

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[6]It is not crucial to **Case #1** that Mariya is uncertain between several different words—'dada', 'that', or 'dodo'. We can envisage a case in which Mariya can only think of a sound—that corresponds to 'that' —as a candidate to refer to an ostensive Davis but in which she is still highly uncertain whether that is correct. In this case too, she would successfully refer but given the lack of know-how and confidence, the act of reference would not be controlled.

[7]In this respect, **Case #1** resembles Buchanan's (2018) cases of meaning without belief. However, Buchanan's cases do not focus on lack of control. By contrast, **Case #2** is meant to show that even if the belief is present, the referring does not plausibly seem intentional, because of the lack of control.

successfully refers to Davis—Davis is certainly whom she wanted to talk about. But she lacks control over her referring to Davis. After all, she does not know how one demonstratively refers to Davis in English; she just guessed among some options. Her performance is not that different from the subject irrationally intending to win a fair lottery or a beginner who is irrationally confident in their ability to hit targets. Just like these cases, an irrational confidence in a random, incompetent guess does not suffice for control. No know-how, no control; and no control, no intentional action.

In **Case #2**, the agent is irrationally confident in her success at referring. She doesn't even have a justified belief about what she is doing, as her confidence is utterly irrational. This aspect of the case is not essential to the point we want to make either. Consider **Case #3**:

> **Case #3 Justified but no know-how:**
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> Mariya speaks English well enough to get by, and it is not her first language. She was taught by a native speaker of English, but she has not gotten to practise it much. It so happens that the week when pronouns were introduced to her class, the teacher was someone who did not know much English, but pretended to. By chance, the class were told correctly by this fake English teacher that 'that' is a demonstrative pronoun in English. Mariya uses it immediately afterwards to single out Davis as before to the house manager, thinking, but not knowing, that it is a demonstrative pronoun.

In **Case #3** too, Mariya manages to refer to Davis, just like an ordinary speaker of English. But she was merely lucky in succeeding; so she was not in control, and because she does not know how to use 'that', there is no intentional action.[8]

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[8]As she interacts with English speakers, Mariya will eventually learn how to use 'that' in English. Our point is only that immediately after her lesson, Mariya does not know how to use that word, and it is just luck that she manages to refer with it as intended.

What all of these cases illustrate is that demonstrative reference can happen *in the absence* of the speaker's control. And in all of these cases, it is extremely plausible that successful reference is happening, since the speaker intends to refer to an individual and does so in accordance with that intention. So **Cases #1-#3** differ from **Stuck Arm** in that they clearly involve acts of reference. And so, in all of these cases, it is plausible that reference-determination for the demonstrative *does* happen. However, because of the lack of competence of the agents involved, their acts of referring fail to be under their control.

For another different case of uncontrolled reference, consider a case involving failures at word production:

> **Case #4 Linguistic skills, production failure**
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> Hans is a non-native English speaker. By the end of the day, especially when he is tired, English starts to fail him. He has a little kid whom he wants to entertain, so he keeps producing sounds, trying to tell the little kid a story, but the wrong words come out. Hans is not just making weird noises at random; he has a story in mind, and he is going through the story, though the words that come out are all mangled. So he has lost all hope of making sense, but he is still doing it for the sake of his kid. At some point, the right words surprisingly come out: 'that is my bike!'

In **Case #4**, Hans is not linguistically incompetent. The failure at word production is just a performance issue. And yet it seems that although he succeeds at referring to his bike when finally the right words come out, in this instance, Hans is not in control of his referring to his bike, because of his tiredness. This case illustrates that the sort of accidentality that is incompatible with intentional referring does not necessarily have to do with one's lack of linguistic competence.

5. Possible Objections

Our argument depends on many premises—about referring and about control—and on some intuitions. There are, therefore, many places where our arguments can be resisted. We doubt that any discussion in this area can be free of such dangers; still, we would like to consider some objections, with no claim to be comprehensive.

The first objection concerns the nature of the intention of the speakers in the first three cases. Consider Quine's distinction between wanting a particular sloop and wanting relief from slooplessness—that is, wanting to have a sloop, no matter which one (Quine 1956). There are various degrees in between these extremes: you may want one of three particular sloops, and not care which one *of them*; this stands between wanting any old sloop, and wanting a particular one. One might think that something similar is happening in our cases. While Mariya has one particular person in mind whom she wants to refer to, so her intention to refer to Davis is clearly specific, we can describe her linguistic intention as being on a similar spectrum: she intends to refer to Davis with one of three words—that is, 'that', 'dodo', and 'dada'. Her word-intention is neither purely general (she does not intend to make some noise or other), nor is it about one particular word. One may, then, argue that this intention of hers is still doing the work that intentionalists need it to do, and that our cases merely point out that speakers' relevant reference-determining intentions can be somewhere on the spectrum, though they are typically at the singular ('relational') end. If so, one might object that our cases need not challenge classical intentionalism, with its claim of inevitable speaker control over reference, but only an intentionalist view that insists on the specificity of referential intentions in the position of the linguistic item.

Though we know of no intentionalists taking this line, it is an interesting one to consider. Nonetheless, we think the objection fails, because a generic intention of

that sort is not the right kind of intention for an intentionalist account of demonstrative reference. The reason is best seen if one considers a sentence with two tokens of the same demonstrative: 'That is larger than that' (said while pointing respectively at a dog and at a horse, in response to the question whether the dog is the largest animal in the park). The speaker intends to use the word 'that' to refer to each animal in turn; this part is clear. But this generic intention cannot direct the first token to the dog, and the second token to the horse. What the intentionalist needs is for the speaker to intend to refer to the dog *with the first token* of 'that', and to the horse *with the second token*.

One worry with this response is that, though perhaps when it comes to sentences such as 'That is larger than that', the intentionalist would have to invoke fairly specific referential intentions with respect to the referential expression, this may not be a universal feature of the kind of mental states that intentionalists ought to appeal to. For example, consider someone who cannot produce speech in the usual way but who has been fitted with a speech-generating device. The device has yet to be calibrated to a default language. The speaker observes an impending calamity and randomly selects the production of a demonstrative pronoun, in any language, to warn the audience of the danger. It seems that in such a case the speaker can successfully refer but one might contend their intention is not specific with respect to the referential expression. More generally, one might worry that if the intention precedes the production of the tokens, the reference-fixing intention would not be specific. Thus, one might object that the intentionalist must be able to invoke fairly generic intentions with respect to the linguistic expression to be used to do the reference-fixing work, in order to accommodate cases such as the above, and so can avoid the present challenge by claiming that Mariya is in control with respect to those generic intentions.

In response, we think it is important to distinguish between an intention being specific and being *de re*. Even if one cannot have singular or *de re* thoughts about merely future existents, so that in the case considered the intention with respect to the linguistic expression would not be *de re*, this need not affect the specificity of the thought or of the intention. If Quine wants the largest sloop, his desire is not generic (only one particular sloop will do), though of course he might have no particular sloop in mind, in the *de re*, or singular, way of having in mind. In the example considered, the subject can refer since they intended the next demonstrative token randomly produced by the speech generating device, whatever it is, to warn the audience. Thus, while their intention is not *de re*, it is nonetheless specific. This is why it can do the reference-fixing work.

For these reasons, we believe that thinking about 'That is larger than that'-type cases does teach us something about the sort of intentions that intentionalists need *in general*. When Mariya intends to use 'that', she may well have a generic intention somewhere in her plan-making (for example, she might intend to use some word of English or other to refer to Davis). But that is not the intention that takes the token to the referent—that is, it is not the intention that does the reference-determining work. What is needed for reference is that she has specific, albeit not necessarily *de re*, intentions about the token of 'that' that she does produce. In the simplest cases, she needs to pick a word, (or perhaps just a noise, in the hope that it counts as the articulation of a word), and in order to guide the token to its reference, she needs to token it by intending it to refer to a particular thing. One way to see this even more vividly is to consider a variant of Mariya's **Case #3** in which she utters precisely the sentence 'That is larger than that'. In this sort of case, Mariya's referential intentions would have to be specific with respect to the referential expression to fix the referent of the two occurrences of 'that'; thus, in this case, one cannot object that there is a generic interpretation available. Nonetheless, just like in the original **Case**

#3, while she succeeds at referring, not knowing how to demonstratively refer in English, Mariya cannot be in control.

The second objection is that some intentionalists claim to give a theory for the normal cases (for example, Unnsteinsson 2022). We agree that ours are not common cases: speakers of any language tend to know their demonstratives, and they tend to expect the right words to come out under normal circumstances. Nonetheless, we submit that abnormal referrings need an account too: black swans are not lesser swans, and Mariya's acts of referring are not lesser acts of referring. Thus, at worst we are pointing out that such intentionalisms cannot explain reference in the cases we have presented. The next step for such an intentionalist is either an error theory about our intuitions about these cases, or a disjunctive account that treats them separately from normal cases. By contrast, the kind of account we discuss in the next section is a minimal expansion of the intentionalist view, and it nicely captures our cases as well.

The last objection concerns the judgments that our cases are supposed to elicit. Our counterexamples are supposed to prompt two judgments. That reference occurs, and that it is not controlled. We trust readers to share both judgments. On the assumption that control is required for intentional action, our cases are also supposed to show that referring can be done unintentionally. The argument for the lack of control and intentionality in our cases relies on drawing a parallel between referring and other types of action. In general, actions can only be controlled and intentional if they are not lucky. Since our cases all involve lucky reference, the referring cannot be controlled nor intentional.

One might retort that, while lucky-but-controlled-and-intentional action is not intelligible, lucky-but-controlled-and-intentional reference *is* intelligible. The problem with this response is it construes referring as a *sui generis* action; it is one of our main points in this article that doing so is unmotivated. Lacking a story about

why controlled or intentionally referring in particular could be lucky, while other controlled and intentional actions cannot, this move strikes us as ad hoc.

Now, one might think that there is a Bratman-style explanation to give of why reference can be controlled and intentional in a way that's compatible with luck. When a speaker intends to refer to *o*, they form a plan. That plan has incremental steps. Those steps are themselves intentions. So what happens if one of those incremental steps is lucky? While the luckiness or loss of control is contained to that step, one might nonetheless think that the broader plan—the plan to refer—remains in their control (for example, see Harris 2019: 63 for a Bratman-style construal of intentionalism).

While the general Bratman-style picture above might be well-suited to guarantee control in a variety of cases, it is insufficient to guarantee the sort of control that intentionalists associate with demonstrative reference. Just as in the discussion of generic intentions above, these broader intentions that are not lucky—that is, the general plan to refer—are not the ones that can fix the reference of a demonstrative token. The more specific ones do—it is the very simple plan of referring to Davis with a token of the demonstrative 'that' that fixes the referent, and it is this specific plan that is lucky in the cases described. Moreover this specific plan is so central to the overall plan that its luckiness is bound to infect the general plan too. So, while we are sympathetic to a Bratman-style construal of intentionalism, by itself it will not overcome our puzzles.

Finally, we want to emphasise that our main argument does not hinge on the intentionality judgments—only on the judgments about *lack of control*. Our focus is on whether one needs to have control in order to successfully refer—not on whether successful reference ought to be intentional. If so, one might object that **Case #1-#3** are cases of intentional referring and yet agree with us that they are not cases of controlled referring. Once one grants that **Case #1-#3** are not cases of

controlled referring, our main goal has been achieved, since that alone suffices to show that intentionalism has to give up claims about control.

6. A New Intentionalism

It is time to pull the strings of our main argument. Recall that according to strong intentionalism, a speaker's intentions directly determine the referent and a speaker's control over reference-determination is absolute. Against this brand of intentionalism, **Cases #1-#3** show that reference-determination can happen *without* the speaker's control over the act of referring to a particular individual, as these are cases where reference-determination co-exists with the lack of know-how of the speaker which would ensure the speaker's control.

But recall that from here, it is a short step to the conclusion that reference determination can happen without a speaker's control *over the mechanism of reference-determination*. After all, presumably referential intentions don't just determine reference *by magic*; rather, they determine reference by being realised *through* acts of reference, via a causal story that goes like this: a speaker intends to use a demonstrative token to refer to X, and this intention is realised by the act of referring to X, which is a spatio-temporally located event that contains the referent X as its part. Now, if referential intentions can determine reference only through an act of reference as described, it follows that the reference-determination cannot be under the speaker's control if the act of reference is not under the speaker's control. Then, by showing that reference-determination can happen without the speaker's control over the act of reference, **Cases #1-#3** show, against strong intentionalism, that reference determination can happen without the speaker's control over it.

This is our main conclusion. Another important consequence is worth emphasising. We have been assuming that control in action is necessary for intentional action. If this assumption is granted, then the first consequence is that, contrary to what is

widely and more or less implicitly assumed in the philosophy of language, the act-type of referring is not *essentially intentional*. Essentially intentional actions are action-types that cannot be executed non-intentionally. A long tradition in the philosophy of action assumes that there are such essentially intentional actions (Anscombe 1957; Bennett 1988). Among the most plausible candidates for being essentially intentional actions are linguistic acts such as greeting, calling, and referring. However, assuming that intentional actions require control, and granting that linguistic acts such as referring can be performed in the absence of the agent's control over it, it follows that it is dubious that they count as essentially intentional (see Beddor and Pavese 2022 for more general arguments against positing essentially intentional actions).

Thus, conventionalism is right that a speaker's control is not needed for reference-determination. Indeed, we contend that **Cases #1-#3** are better cases on behalf of conventionalism than the case provided by Stojnić *et al.* (2013), since they clearly involve an act of referring on the part of the speaker and so, clearly involve reference. The possibility of reference without control suggests that strong intentionalism is not a suitable form of intentionalism.

What about moderate intentionalism? According to it, the speaker is in control over the mechanisms of reference determination *conditionally* on whether further non-trivial conditions are met, concerning the audience's beliefs, linguistic conventions, or conventions about gestures, etc. Although **Cases #1-#3** explicitly target only strong intentionalism, it is easy to come up with slight variants of these cases where reference occurs in absence of conditional control. To see this, imagine a variant of **Case #2** in which the audience is competent, attentive, and reasonable, as required, for example, by the coordination account in (King 2014), where pointing accompanies the use of the demonstratives and all the required conventions about gestures and about the use of demonstratives are satisfied. In

this variant case, the speaker would still refer successfully but without the sort of conditional control required by moderate intentionalism, due to their lack of know-how or skill.

Thus, the possibility of reference without a speaker's control shows that both strong intentionalism and moderate intentionalism are false. The general lesson is that both versions of intentionalism require a bit too much on the part of the speaker for reference-determination. Do these observations establish conventionalism over intentionalism, though? Not quite. Our discussion so far has only shown that control of the speaker is eliminable from reference determination; not that *intentions* are eliminable.

As we have seen, control over one's actions is more demanding than mere intending: one might intend to perform an action and yet fail to bring this action under their control. For example, in **Case #2** and **Case #3**, Mariya intends to refer to a particular person; that person is, in fact, named 'Davis'; and yet because of her lack of linguistic competence, she fails to have control over the mechanisms of reference-determination.

Since control is more demanding than mere intending, a better construal of intentionalism forgoes control but maintains that a speaker's mental states play a non-eliminable role in reference-determination. Call this view 'modest intentionalism'. Modest intentionalism is *intentionalism out of control*: it differs from both strong intentionalism and moderate intentionalism in that it requires no (absolute or conditional) control but still gives a non-eliminable role in demonstrative reference to a speaker's mental states.

While **Cases #1-#3** support conventionalism over strong and moderate intentionalism, they do not support conventionalism over modest intentionalism. **Cases #1-#3** are all cases of uncontrolled referring. But in all of them, reference determination takes place. We claim that this is so because the speakers' mental

states still play the relevant reference-determining role. First, consider **Case #1** and **Case #2**. We have mentioned that in these two cases, the speaker has very little or no confidence in their referential success. And yet arguably some degree of confidence is necessary for intending. For this reason, it is not clear that these speakers possess an intention to refer. While this might be correct, one should not conclude that intentions are irrelevant to reference-determination. It is again helpful to look at how action theorists think of these sorts of cases, where subjects act without an intention to perform the relevant action. Cases of this sort are usually described as still involving an intention—though merely an intention to *try* to *F*, rather than an intention to *F* (for example, Harman 1971: 364; Mele 1989). Exporting this idea to our current cases, it seems plausible that in **Case #1,** the relevant reference-determining intention might be not an intention to refer, but an intention *to try to refer*. If so, the lesson to draw from **Case #1** is not that intentions are irrelevant for reference determination. The lesson then is that modest intentionalism ought to further weaken the intention requirement in order to allow for these cases.

This leaves us with **Case #4**. This case arguably involves neither an intention to refer nor an intention to try to refer. We modelled it on a case from Ludwig (1992: 262):

> **Starting the car.** I have parked my car in the driveway of my neighbour, Mr. Jones. I remember trying to start my car last night and discovering that the battery was dead. Mr. Jones knocks on my door at 8 a.m. asking me to move my car out of his driveway. I say, "I am not really sure I can get the car started", and I start to explain about the battery. But in the meantime Mr. Jones is growling, "No excuses, pipsqueak: Just move the car". As I recall Mr. Jones's history of mental illness, I do not argue the point. I do not think that I have any chance of starting the car—zero probability. But I believe that if Mr.

Jones can see that I am sincerely trying to start the car, he will see that it will not start despite my efforts, and I will at least escape with my life. So I get in the car, put the key in the ignition, pump the gas a couple of times, and turn the key. To my astonishment, the car starts, and I realise that it was the car I parked in my other neighbor's driveway that had the dead battery.

Cases such as **Starting the car** are used in action theory to illustrate a general point—that is, that one might perform an action (such as starting the car), despite believing that it is impossible to perform it. Moreover, the agent plausibly does not even intend to try to start it, since the agent is certain that their effort will be fruitless. The guiding intention here is more general: that of *showing* that the car will not start. **Case #4** is in some respects similar to **Starting the car**: there is an intention guiding the utterance of 'that is my bike' but the intention is not an intention to refer, nor an intention to try to refer.

Here again, it would be too quick to conclude that in **Case #4** reference-determination is not done by a mental state of the speaker. Indeed, Hans still aims to talk about his bike to his kid *were he to succeed at making an utterance*. *Aiming* is not quite an intention, as traditionally conceived, as it is a pro-attitude which does not require any confidence of success. But it might nonetheless play a reference-determining role.

In order to bring the point home that a pro-attitude might still guide what the speaker is doing in **Case #4**, consider the following variation of the case, where the speaker sees that they cannot articulate their thoughts properly, but their kid is laughing, so they go on to make language-like noises, but they are not guided by any thoughts of communicating or by a message to be expressed, or anything else for that matter. Suppose that, randomly, a sentence comes out of Hans' mouth, and that it contains a demonstrative. In this case, it seems clear that no reference takes place, because Hans would not be aiming to be saying anything at all: while there is

a mental state guiding Hans' behaviour (the speaker wants to make his kid laugh), it is not the right kind of mental state because it is not a pro-attitude about what the speaker wants to talk about, and so, it cannot be relevant for determining the reference of the demonstrative.

In conclusion, cases of reference without control such as **Case #4**, do not show that a speaker's mental states are irrelevant for determining the reference of a demonstrative; rather, they show that control is not required and that the relevant reference-determining role does not need to be played by an intention as traditionally conceived, provided that it is played by some referential pro-attitude of the speaker. Thus, such cases can still be accommodated by intentionalism provided that one is liberal in one's conception of the reference-determining mental states. Modest intentionalism offers such a liberal view: according to it, reference-determining role is played by a referential pro-attitude (either *an intention to refer*, traditionally conceived, or *an intention to try to refer*, or even some weaker pro-attitude, such as *aiming to refer*).

6. Conclusion

Modest intentionalism maintains that a speaker's mental attitudes play a role in the semantics of demonstratives, while allowing that the speaker may or may not be in control of the operations of the referential mechanism. In some ways, it is placed in the middle, between classical intentionalism and conventionalism. We think of it as a promising version of intentionalism, in that it keeps its core anti-conventionalist tenets.

The broader observation is that it is very fruitful to combine results from action theory with the classical discussion within philosophy of language about the role of intentions in semantics. There is much to gain from exploring this area of overlap between two often-separated parts of philosophy, and we believe that the debate

between intentionalism and conventionalism in the metasemantics of demonstratives is just one example of the fruitfulness of this approach.

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