

The Possibly Non-Referential Feature of Terms in Deflationary Argument for Realism and Its Result

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Abstract: Deflationary argument in favor of realism, named “easy argument”, employs existential generalization as one of its reasoning steps. The validity of any existential generalization requires that terms in referential positions of its premise be genuinely referential, and both the deflationists and its critics, e.g. fictionalists, have taken for granted that the literal reading of the premise entails that the terms in question have reference. However, there might be “bad easy arguments” that follow the standard steps of typical easy arguments but draw intuitively unacceptable consequences due to the possibly non-referential feature of terms in their referential positions though every sentence in the arguments is clearly true. An issue arising from bad arguments is how the advocates of easy arguments tell which of apparently referring expressions are really referential and thus which of easy arguments are really plausible. This paper tries to show: (1) the apparently referential terms at least in some bad easy arguments and those in typical easy arguments are not discriminable with respect to their referential behaviors, (2) the transformation rules, something-from-nothing inference rules, application conditions, and co-application conditions, proposed by deflationists like Amie Thomasson and Stephen Schiffer, fail to guarantee the required successful reference. From (1) and (2) it can be derived that the widely believed literal reading of the premise of easy arguments is not guaranteed. To come to realism conclusion, the deflationists will have to simply claim the required referential success, but this means that the existence of disputed entities is directly given in that, according to (R) Scheme in Thomasson 2008, the existential assertion is a simple result of a semantic descent from the metalanguage assertion about referential success. Originally, deflationary arguments are easy in two senses, first, its first premise is only empirically uncontroversial fact, second, its first reasoning step uses only clear conceptual truths established by usage of ordinary language. Hence, what the argument needs, the deflationists believe, cannot go beyond what ordinary competent speakers actually and easily accept. But if what is said here is true, the claim about the existence of metaphysically controversial entities backed up by the deflationists has nothing to do with any intuitively easy inference based on linguistic competence and common sense of ordinary speakers. As a result, deflationary arguments, even if still easy, would be so in another sense, a sense which deflationists don't like.