

Dissertation title: Modality, Names and Descriptions
Author's name: Zsófia Zvolenszky
Advisor's name: Kit Fine

ABSTRACT

The dissertation comprises three papers. “The Lost Pillar of Deontic Modality” concerns a thorny problem posed by conditional requirements: we expect some modal conditionals of the form ‘if p , then it must be that p ’ to be false, yet they all come out true given two basic assumptions needed to account for ordinary conditional requirement like ‘If the light turns red, then cars must stop’. The first assumption is a semantic expectation linking conditional requirements with absolute ones, the second is the possible-worlds-based definition of modal sentences. Keeping the former means giving up the latter, a result with profound implications for Kratzer’s formal semantics, modifications thereof, as well as deontic logics.

In “Naming with Necessity”, it is argued that Kripke’s thesis that proper names are rigid designators is best seen as being motivated by an individual-driven picture of modality, which has two parts. First, inherent in proper-name usage is the expectation that names refer to modally robust individuals: individuals that can sustain modal predications like ‘is necessarily human’. Second, these modally robust individuals are the fundamental building blocks on the basis of which possible worlds should be conceived in a modal semantics intended to mirror the conceptual apparatus behind ordinary modal talk. The individual-driven picture is distinct from two views inspired by Kripke, direct reference theory and Millianism. The former covers only the first half of the picture, while the latter explicitly gives up on that half even, opting to remain neutral about what expectation expressions impose on the nature of their referents.

“Incomplete Descriptions, Incomplete Quantified Expressions” offers a unified, quantificational treatment of incomplete descriptions like ‘the table’. An incomplete quantified expression like ‘every bottle’ (as in “Every bottle is empty”) can feature in true utterances despite the fact that the world contains nonempty bottles. Positing a contextual restriction on the bottles being talked about is a straightforward solution. It is argued that the same strategy can be extended to incomplete definite descriptions across the board. Incorporating the contextual restrictions into semantics involves meeting a complex array of desiderata, yet the apparently simpler pragmatic alternative faces severe problems and is therefore a nonstarter.