Quotation and Abstraction:
Towards a Theory of Linguistic Entities[*]

Jan Schreiber
Universität Duisburg-Essen
Fachbereich Geisteswissenschaften
Institut für Philosophie
D-45117 Essen
jan.schreiber@uni-duisburg-essen.de

Introduction. According to Davidson (1979), a quotation is a deferred ostension that refers to a linguistic type via a displayed token. Many, if not most, philosophers today tend to avoid reference to abstract entities such as types. These are often considered somewhat shady objects to whose existence nobody in his/her right sense wants to be committed. Among the arguments against accepting their existence are epistemological reservations: How can a philosopher who defends an empiricist epistemology (in the broadest sense of the term) account for our ability to "grasp" abstract objects, given their purported causal inertness? Aren't we committed to some sort of implausible rationalism or Platonism if we admit abstract objects among the furnishings of our universe?

As far as quotation is concerned, several philosophers who have participated in the debate on this subject matter have gone to some length to develop an account that gets along without such commitments: Lejewski (1981) conceives quotations as general terms (rather than singular terms referring to types), Roden (2004: 191) posits "an ontology of repeatable [concrete] events", and Cappelen/LePore (1997) painstakingly rephrase Davidson's demonstrative account in such a way as to avoid any reference to types. Thus, for example

(1)   "loud" is a word

on their reading becomes

(2) $\wedge x\, (\mathrm{ST}(x, \text{that}) \rightarrow \mathrm{W}_{\mathrm{token}}(x))$: loud,

where "that" refers to the token exhibited after the colon, "ST" means "same-tokens", and "$\mathrm{W}_{\mathrm{token}}$" means "is a word token".

Quotation of types. I will briefly sketch a Fregean theory of abstraction *that construes linguistic types as sets of tokens*. It will hopefully make it plausible that there is no need to eschew linguistic types in a theory of quotation, because they only commit us to the existence of sets, which aren't dubious at all: They have precisely those properties we bestow upon them via our set-theoretic axioms.

All modern theories of abstraction share the conviction that the following abstraction principle must hold good:

(3) $\wedge x \wedge y \, (f(x) = f(y) \leftrightarrow x R y)$,

where R is an equivalence relation that holds between the concrete entities, and the functional expression "$f(x)$" denotes the abstract object that x instantiates. For example, two lines have the same direction iff they are parallel to each other. It was Frege's (1884) original insight that (3) will turn out a theorem once we accept the equation

(4) $\wedge x \, (f(x) = \{y \mid x R y\})$,

that is, *abstracta* are equivalence classes.

If we had a non-circular characterization of Cappelen/LePore's ST relation at hand, we could easily construe linguistic types as follows:

(5) $\wedge x \, (\text{type}(x) = \{y \mid \text{ST}(y, x)\})$,

provided ST is an equivalence relation that applies to tokens. Example (1) is thus rendered

(6) $W_{\text{type}}(\{x \mid \text{ST}(x, \text{that})\})$: loud.

Types of quotation. However, one may wonder what exactly "ST" means. I suggest that we establish a number of very basic equivalence relations that apply to tokens, for example *looks-like* (Ll) and *sounds-like* (Sl). Then we get

(7)   'loud' $= \{x \mid \text{Ll}(x, \text{that})\}$: loud
         [laʊd] $= \{x \mid \text{Sl}(x, /\text{laʊd}/)\}$.

More abstract entities such as graphemes, lexemes and concepts can be introduced along the same lines. The *lexeme* <loud> for example turns out to be something like

(8)   <loud> = 'loud' ∪ 'louder' ∪ 'loudest' ∪ 'LOUD' ∪ 'LOUDER' ∪ 'LOUDEST' ∪
         [laʊd] ∪ [ˈlaʊdə] ∪ [ˈlaʊdɪst],

while the *concept* <<loud>> might be

(9)   <<loud>> = $\{x \mid \text{Synonym}(<\text{loud}>)\}$.

References

Cappelen, Herman/LePore, Ernest (1997): "Varieties of Quotation." *Mind* 106, 429–450

Davidson, Donald (1979): "Quotation." *Theory and Decision* 11, 27–40

Frege, Gottlob (1884): *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik*. Breslau

Lejewski, Czesław (1981): "Propositional Attitudes and Extensionality," in: Edgar Morscher/Otto Neumaier/Gerhard Zecha (eds.): *Philosophie als Wissenschaft*. Bad Reichenhall, 211–228

Roden, David (2004): "Radical Quotation and Real Repetition." *Ratio* 17, 191–206