

# Links have semantics, URIs don't

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The philosophy of language has a long history of exploration of names and reference. As the Web tries to resolve a number of difficult issues around the use of URIs as identifiers, both on the Old-Fashioned Web (OFW) and the Semantic Web/the web of Linked Open Data (SemWeb), it is worth considering that history for clues as to what might contribute to resolving those issues.

In particular, in this talk I explore the question of the context of reference from this perspective. In doing so, I'll actually raise some questions, particularly about compositionality, which push back on received wisdom from philosophy of language.

Discourse about names makes assumptions about context of reference, albeit they are rarely discussed. The simplest cases are use/mention and national language: Contrast, for example

J'ai vue un chat

Lets have a chat

and (as spoken)

The word Colin has five letters

My friend Colin has five bikes

But richer examples raise deeper questions. Consider the subtly different (or are they?) oppositions of specific/generic and concrete/abstract

The lion ate the antelope

The lion is a fearsome beast

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Richard Nixon appointed Henry Kissinger to be Secretary of State

Henry Kissinger was Secretary of State from 1973 to 1977

An unusually reticent Henry Kissinger ducked all questions from the press

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BA3141 will depart from gate 17 at 1945

BA3141 has a 92% on-time record

Different approaches to formal semantics attempt to address these phenomena in different ways, but in one way or another they all compromise on compositionality.

If we turn to URIs, the above examples lead us to consider whether we should be quite so quick to insist on treating URIs as completely-context-independent identifiers. Previous work has suggested that some degree of indexicality needs to be taken into account. Perhaps we need to acknowledge more along the same lines: the as-it-were `_linguistic_` context of use of a URI contributes to its interpretation, that is, to the determination of what it identifies.

If we contrast two such contexts

```
<a href="http://www.w3.org/">...</a>
```

```
<http://www.w3.org/TR/2001/WD-rdf-syntax-grammar-20011218> doc:versionOf
```

```
<http://www.w3.org/TR/rdf-syntax-grammar>
```

we just `_might_` feel that we had some leverage on the infamous `httpRange-14` problem. This is the thin end of a long wedge, as the saying goes, and it is certainly not obvious where along the way from notation to abstract syntax to model to the world the necessary discrimination should take place, but just asking this question seems to me a step forward.