

## **Denotation in Discourse Semantics**

In standard formal and philosophical semantics, which do not recognize cognitive structures and processes as an essential factor in the semantic description of uttered sentences, the terms 'denotation,' 'designation,' and 'reference' are used interchangeably. There, they stand for the relation between definite terms in a sentence and the

object or set of objects that they stand for when the sentence is true. In discourse-based semantics (see *Discourse Semantics*), definite terms in a sentence are mapped first onto a cognitive representation of whatever object or set of objects they may stand for when the sentence is true. Such cognitive representations are called by various names, such as 'file cards' (Heim 1982), or 'addresses' (Seuren 1985). This mapping of definite terms onto the appropriate discourse file cards or addresses takes place regardless of whether the sentence is true or false, or lacks a truth-value altogether, as in fiction. It is considered to be the first essential step in the natural process of sentence comprehension.

In discourse semantics, the term 'denotation' (see *Denotation*) stands for the relation between definite terms in a sentence and the appropriate addresses (file cards) in the discourse structure that has been built up till the moment of utterance of the sentence in question. Denotation is thus distinct from reference, in that the latter names the relation between linguistic definite terms and the object or set of objects in the real world that they stand for. Seuren (1985) proposes to reserve the term 'designation' for the relation between an address and the object or objects represented by it in case of truth.

*See also:* Incrementation; Presupposition.

### **Bibliography**

- Heim I 1982 The semantics of definite and indefinite noun phrases  
(Doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts)
- Seuren P A M 1985 *Discourse Semantics*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford