

# On (How to Make Sense of) Virtualects

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In the augmented reality game *Pokémon GO* (PG), a smartphone's screen shows not only the player's real surroundings (as captured by the phone's camera), but also 3D wire frame models of *Pokémon*—fantasy creatures of myriad shapes, colours and sizes—, so as to create an appearance to the effect that these creatures inhabit the same reality as we do. In this talk, I present and discuss a linguistic puzzle that PG gives rise to.

Here's the puzzle. Two PG players, Anne and Ben, stroll around a park, when Anne, looking at a bush through her phone's screen, suddenly utters

(1) I see a jigglypuff!,

followed by Ben's looking at that same bush through his phone's screen, calling "I see it, too!", and their subsequent running towards the bush. Now, if we assume that Pokémon terms like "jigglypuff" function just as Kripke (1980, 2013) and Nimtz (2017) believe actual species terms like "tiger" to function, then "jigglypuff" doesn't actually denote any species, and so is actually devoid of content; and thus (1), as uttered by Anne, is actually devoid of content. But arguably, Anne's utterance of (1) *has* content; for how else could it facilitate the kind of communication and coordinated action that PG so characteristically involves? So what could this content be, *given* the Kripkean assumption?

To answer this question, I shall assume that in playing PG, Anne and Ben engage in a game of make-believe (in the sense of Walton (1990)), and so that (1) has content at least *make-believedly*. In playing PG, that is, Anne and Ben don't just make-believedly presuppose that certain non-linguistic facts obtain, such as the fact that certain species exist, but also that certain terms denote such species

in the same way as actual species terms denote actual species. I call the language that Anne and Ben thus make-believable speak the *Pokémon GO Virtualect*. What is the content of (1) *within the Virtualect*, then, and what, in reality, grounds this virtual content?

I propose that it is the real-world game itself, *Pokémon GO*, which provides PG players with denotation fixers for the Pokémon terms as used within the Virtualect. In playing PG, one is both a real-world appreciator of the game's rules, descriptions and principles of generation (of fictional truths), and, in virtue of being thus informed, a fluent speaker of the Virtualect. One's external knowledge of PG thus metasemantically informs the language spoken as part of the game of make-believe. Finally, by drawing on a broadly Fregean semantics (Künne, 2007), and by making use of so-called *deflector phrases* as introduced by Kracht (2015), I show how even non-PG-players can exploit this interplay between real-world descriptions and virtual contents in order to make sense of (1)—not in the Virtualect, but in ordinary English.

## References

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