

What sort of interpretation do proper names have? Do they have a sense, are they equivalent to descriptions (or clusters of descriptions), or do they have a reference? What is rigidity? If names are rigid what does that imply?

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Names are essential to language, and are used in every day talk with little attention paid to their precise meaning. A philosophical investigation of what names are, however, uncovers a much more diverse set of theories and positions. Philosophers from Mill on to contemporary philosophers today have grappled with the underpinnings of what goes on when we assign names to objects. This essay examines a few of the most long-lasting theories regarding proper names—Frege’s sense theory, Russell’s descriptivist theory, and a newer rigid designator theory from Saul Kripke. In subsequent uses of the word “names” I shall take it to mean *proper names*, and not, unless specified, definite descriptions. Furthermore, although Frege for the most part is discussing words, we shall be dealing with the subset of names as it is clearer for our topic at hand.

1 Names and senses

Frege, writing at the end of the 19th century, was one of the first challengers of Mill’s view that a name is simply the same as the reference that it is denoting. Mill held that the semantic value of a name was simply the referent that it pointed to, and that there was nothing else in the name itself. But Frege’s response to Mill’s straightforward theory of names was in the form of a counter-example: “(1) The morning star is the morning star,” “(2) The morning star is the evening star.” According to Mill’s theory, both of these sentences have the same semantic value, as “the morning star” and “the evening star” relate to the same thing. But (1) is quite clearly true *a priori*, said Frege, while (2) is something which is not immediately obvious for everyone and can be discovered. The fact that there is any difference in the understanding of these two sentences point to the fact that there must be more than just the referent as a content of the name itself.

Frege’s answer is to separate a name into a sense and a reference. The reference he holds to be the actual thing that the name is referring to, the object itself. The reference is unique for each name. However, the sense of a name is not unique, and there are many senses for most names—each of the senses for each name points to that name’s reference. The sense of a name is a “way of thinking” (Forbes, 2009) about it, and the understanding of a sense is straightforward, as “The sense [...] is grasped by everybody who is sufficiently familiar with the language or totality of designations to which it belongs.” (Frege, 1993, p. 24) Furthermore, an essential point for Frege is that when someone grasps the sense of a word he is not required to grasp the reference. The reference is required in order to define the truth value of a sentence, because (1) is true under the same conditions as (2). However the sense is required to understand the meaning of a name or sentence, because the reference is not part of the meaning. His argument for maintaining that the sense of an object must be more than its reference refers to “informational content.” Going back to our example, when scientists discovered that the morning star and the evening star are really both Venus and learned the sentence (2), the simple fact that they learned some new information shows that there must be something missing, or at least different from, (1). So to know whether or not a sentence is true, we need only the reference of the words and names that are its parts. But to know the meaning of the sentence, we need the sense of the words and sentences. (Dummett, 1992)

The end result of Frege’s distinctions is a 3-tiered structure, with names pointing to any number of potential senses, and all these senses pointing back to the same reference. Frege’s theory is heavily criticized by Kripke, and these criticisms will briefly be reviewed later. It seems to me however that

there is little support for this complicated multi-layered semantics. Frege uses this idea of sense to avoid the problems that Mill was unable to handle, but does so by adding an extra feature to our use of names. When I talk about someone named “Aristotle,” although I am thinking of this person within the framework of my knowledge, and have some approach to this person conditioned by my particular situation, I simply wish to refer to the person who I am talking about named Aristotle. The requirement that each invocation of a name contain both a sense and a reference, the sense leading to the reference, and the sense providing meaning while the reference provides the truth-value, is too implausible.

2 Names as descriptions

Another influential theory of naming, descriptivism, originated with Russell at the beginning of the 20th century. He simply took names to be synonymous with definite descriptions, and held that they were interchangeable. So every name can also be specified in the form “the F ” where F is some property or function of the name. This theory was also used by Russell to avoid the problems that Mill’s theory had with the equivalence of celestial bodies. However, he is able to avoid this problem without resorting to the dual-layer semantic theory that Frege had constructed. In the sentence “The morning star is the same as the evening star,” the phrase “morning star” and the phrase “evening star” could have different definite descriptions, thereby eliminating the problem. (Russell, 1950) This also allows someone to be acquainted with the description of an individual without knowing the individual himself, so one can calmly say “Aristotle was the teacher of Alexander the Great,” even though one has never met Aristotle. One of the problems with a descriptivist theory of names is that it is unclear how exactly to choose which description to use. The name “Aristotle” could be substituted by any number of descriptions, from “The most famous pupil of Plato,” to “Someone I think I have heard of who lived when the Greeks lived and is famous.” This would make the definition of who Aristotle is a bit weak and murky. Another objection to this account begins with the assumption that “Aristotle” is the same as the definite description “The tutor of Alexander the Great.” If we are to imagine other possible worlds, and choose one where Alexander the Great was never born, we would be forced to say that in that world there would be no Aristotle either. But this is far from a logical conclusion to arrive at.

An offshoot of Russell’s descriptivist theory can be called cluster descriptivism, because it takes the meaning of a name to be a disjunction of the possible descriptions that can be made about the person. A certain person then is the meaning of a name when a certain threshold of these clustered definitions is met. However, it is unclear to me how to best define this sort of threshold. Being forced to say that a majority of descriptions must be met, or maybe that a majority of the *important* definitions be met, or some other arbitrary system for deciding when a cluster is sufficiently exhausted, is clumsy, ungainly, and unwieldy as a definition of the interpretation of names.

3 Rigid designators

Kripke rejected both Frege’s and Russell’s theories of naming. Names do not involve senses, according to him, because otherwise some statements would be both metaphysically necessary and *a priori* when they are clearly not. Taking the sense of “Aristotle” to be “the pupil of Plato who tutored Alexander [the Great],” we have two sentences: (3) Aristotle was a pupil of Plato, and (4) The pupil of Plato who tutored Alexander was a pupil of Plato. Here (4) is necessary, insofar as we cannot imagine the person who was the pupil of Plato and the tutor of Alexander not being the pupil of Plato. However, it is possible that (3) is false. We can imagine a world where Aristotle was never born, or where Aristotle decided to leave philosophy and take up the sword, and in each of these worlds (3) would be false. But

in these same worlds (4) would still have to be true, leaving us with a contradiction. As in this example Kripke takes the sense of Aristotle to be the definite description “the pupil of Plato,” this argument is also valid and damaging to Russell’s descriptivist account.

This example illuminates Kripke’s idea of a rigid designator. A rigid designator is simply a word that refers to the same object in all possible worlds, and never anything else. That is, “Aristotle” refers to the person Aristotle in all possible worlds whether or not Aristotle was actually the tutor of Alexander the Great. Furthermore, all names are rigid designators. (Kripke, 1980) So by a name what is meant is the person that is named, and it is the same person in all possible worlds that the person exists. If the person does not exist in a possible world, then the name does not refer to anything at all. A definite description, however, is a non-rigid designator. “The tutor of Alexander the Great” may, in a certain possible world, be someone other than Aristotle. This is exactly the opposite of Russell’s descriptivism, because it holds that no names are definite descriptions but rather all concretely identify the object in all worlds where there is an object to be identified, regardless of circumstance. (LaPorte, Fall 2008)

Rigid designators allow us to talk about objects in a clear and simple way, yet avoiding the difficulties that have been posed by the “morning star is the evening star” phrase. We can talk about objects without being forced to split the interpretation of objects into sense and reference, or clusters of definitions. Rather, when naming an object we simply wish to fix the reference of the name to be the object that we are referencing—and when we use directly ambiguous non-rigid definite descriptions, we accept that they do not necessarily mean the same object in all possible cases.

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