

## Classic Text 21 - Philosophy of Language: Names I

In Classical Text 17 we examined some of the characteristics of human language that distinguishes it from other forms of animal communication and why it is of philosophical and psychological interest. Following the text of Devitt & Sterelny's *Language and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language* (2nd Edition) (1999) we introduced the representational theory of meaning as well as some of its shortcomings. We concluded that section with a brief discussion of Frege's distinction between sense and reference as different aspects of meaning. In this study unit we discuss two broad philosophical approaches to the meaning and reference of names, especially proper names. Again we will be guided by Devitt and Sterelny's text, this time following their chapter 3 which is available free for download [here](#). (Under South Africa copyright law individual chapters may be reproduced for educational purposes.<sup>1</sup>)



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### The Common Sense Notion of Names

John Stuart Mill, in his *A System of Logic* (1843) defines a name as, “a word that answers the purpose of showing what thing it is that we are talking about but not of telling anything about it.” Such a common sense notion suffices when we are talking about ordinary names such as “John Stuart Mill” or “Granny Smith apple” but was shown, first by Frege and then by Russell, to be meaningless when applied to meaningful propositions about imaginary and nonexistent entities. Mill's common sense notion also fails to take account of the *sense* of names in opaque contexts, as discussed in Classical Text 17. Thus the sentence

Galileo believed that the morning star was the evening star

is both meaningful and not tautological, despite the fact that the names ‘the morning star’ and ‘the evening star’ identify the same referent. (Wikipedia: Proper name (philosophy))

### The Classical Description Theory of Names

According to the classical description theory of names developed by Frege and Russell, the sense of a name is given by a definite description associated with that name. In other words, names are abbreviated definite descriptions. For example, the following definite descriptions are associated with the name ‘Aristotle’:

...the pupil of Plato

... the tutor of Alexander the Great

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<sup>1</sup> Although we are permitted to reproduce individual chapters for educational purposes, we are not permitted to reproduce more than a third of any given book without permission, therefore we strongly encourage those interested in or enrolled in a Philosophy of Language course to purchase or borrow Devitt & Sterelny's *Language and Reality* from a library or a friend.

... the systemiser of syllogistic logic.

In Classical Text 17 we saw how, according to Frege, sense determines reference. This is clearly an improvement over Mill's definition of a name, above, that leaves the question of its reference unexplained. According to Devitt & Sterelny's reading of classical description theory, for "a name  $a$  which has a sense expressed by the description 'the  $F$ ' and *designates*  $x$ , [t]he theory says that

' $a$ ' designates  $x$  in virtue of 'the  $F$ ' denoting  $x$ .

This reduces our original problem of explaining reference for names to that of explaining reference for definite descriptions. In virtue of what does a definite description *denote*  $x$ ?" (p. 45)

Although the classical description theory replaces one problem with another, as the authors point out, "we had that problem anyway"; moreover it makes some progress because it reduces two problems to one that we are already familiar with. Recall that in Critical Reasoning 14 we examined Russell's theory of descriptions which gave a precise logical definition to any definite description of the form 'the  $F$  denotes  $x$ ' such that, to paraphrase the symbolic notation,

the  $F$  denotes  $x$  if and only if  $F$  applies to  $x$  and to nothing else.

Thus, 'the author of *Word and Object*' denotes the philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine because the definite description 'the author of *Word and Object*' applies to Quine and only Quine. But now we have the problem of explaining the reference of the general terms that can be substituted for  $F$ . In other words, "In virtue of what does a general term *apply* to an object?" But again, this as a problem we had anyway; yet we have made progress because the classical theory of descriptions reduces three problems of reference to one, namely "the problems of designation for names, denotation for definite descriptions and application for general terms are reduced to the problem of application for general terms." (p. 46)

Since the classical description theory supplies a theory of sense, and since sense determines reference, as we saw in Classical Text 17, the classical description theory is a complete theory of names, given that sense and reference exhaust the meaning of a name. However, as the authors point out, "we have an interest not only in meaning, but also in understanding. What is it to be in a position to use ' $a$ ' properly - to be competent with the name?" According to Frege, it is to "grasp its sense." According to the classical description theory, to grasp the sense of ' $a$ ' is to associate it with 'the  $F$ '. But then we have to ask, what do we mean by *associate* ' $a$ ' with 'the  $F$ '? The authors propose a plausible account "that appeals to the inferential dispositions of the speaker." Thus

Max associates 'the teacher of Alexander' with 'Aristotle' in virtue of his standing disposition to infer from claims using the name 'Aristotle' to claims using the description 'the teacher of Alexander' and back again. The description has a "conceptual role" or "functional role" that links it tightly in inference to the name, and *vice versa*. (*l.c.*)

If we combine this view with Frege's theory of reference we can conclude that a competent speaker associates a name with a definite description that applies uniquely to its bearer. This association would count as a belief, expressed as " $a$  is the  $F$ " and if, according to the classical description theory, ' $a$ ' designates what 'the  $F$ ' denotes, then this belief must be true. If the theory can show that such a belief is also justified, rather than a coincidence, then the belief must also count as

knowledge according to the “justified, true, belief” concept of knowledge (see Classic Text 07). Thus, someone who understands ‘Jack the Ripper’ must both believe and *know* something that uniquely identifies him as an historical serial killer. However the description theorist’s confidence that reference-determining beliefs are always justified, because we automatically have “privileged access” to the contents of our own mind, is doubtful. See the discussion around the “Cartesian assumption” in Classic Text 17. The upshot of that for the authors was to conclude that, for names at least, there must be a finer-grained level of meaning than simply referring to a particular individual. However the description theory does provide such a fine-grained level of meaning because, for example, coreferential identity statements such as

Mark Twain is Mark Twain      and

Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens

are associated with different senses in virtue of being associated with different descriptions. Thus ‘Mark Twain’ is often associated with ‘the author of *Huckleberry Finn*’ whereas ‘Samuel Clemens’ may, for example, be associated with ‘the son of Jane and John Marshall Clemens born on 30 November 1835.’ (p. 46 - 47)

As the authors point out the classical description theory is equally adept with singular existence statements containing names, including empty names. Thus, ‘the *F* exists’ is true if and only if it denotes but false if and only if it fails to denote. According to Russell’s theory of descriptions, in turn ‘the *F*’ denotes if and only if there exists one and only one thing that ‘*F*’ applies to. Therefore ‘the *F* exists’ is false, in particular, if ‘the *F*’ fails to apply uniquely. Even if ‘the *F* exists’ is false it does not render such statements meaningless. Neither need there be anything tautological about a true existence statement involving a name. (p. 47) See also Classic Text 17 on Empty names.

Empty names in other contexts are also accommodated by the classical description theory. If a name is empty it is because it fails to denote, yet its description, and hence its meaning still has a sense. A name’s sense is determined partly by its structure, as a definite description, and by the sense of the general term involved, however its failure to denote does not affect either of these. (p. 48)

The problem of opacity, or rather opaque contexts, was introduced in Classic Text 17. The classical description theory explains why substitution of one name by another of the same referent can change the meaning of a statement however it cannot explain why such substitution may not always be truth preserving (*salva veritate*). Recall the example of ‘Bob Dylan is Robert Zimmerman.’ If a name is merely an abbreviated definite description differences in sense that do not alter reference should be irrelevant to a statement’s truth condition. Yet as we saw from the sentences

Jerry Falwell believes Bob Dylan destroyed the moral fibre of America      and

Bob Dylan is Robert Zimmerman

we may not infer

Jerry Falwell believes Robert Zimmerman destroyed the moral fibre of America,

even though ‘Bob Dylan’ and ‘Robert Zimmerman’ refer to the self-same individual. The authors point out that the truth conditions of belief statements, such as the one above, depend not only on

reference but on the *mode* of reference. Such a discussion requires a detour into modal logic; however the matter is simply dropped on p. 48 in accordance with the author's "policy of treating opacity lightly."

### Problems with the Classical Description Theory of Names

Despite the many related problems that the classical description theory solves or reduces to fewer problems, it is beset by its own serious difficulties from the outset. These include

**Principled bias:** People often associate a name with many definite descriptions. Think of the name 'Aristotle'. Apart from those mentioned above we might also associate it with 'the author of *On the Parts of Animals*' or 'the more famous son of Nicomachus of Stagira' etc. Which of these gives the sense of the name or do they all in some way? On the classical description theory, *one* definite description must be *the* right one if it is to denote at all, even though all the other descriptions pick out the same individual. However the theory supplies no "principled bias" for deciding which association should be given special prominence. (p. 48)

**Unwanted ambiguity:** If we had a principled bias and applied it to one user of a name it would, presumably, select a certain definite description that has an important role for that user. However it would almost certainly not select the same definite description for every other member of the speech community, for whom it may have a different yet important role. Therefore, even the name 'Aristotle' has the potential to be ambiguous in many ways. According to the authors, Frege recognised this problem as a consequence of his theory; however he regarded such ambiguity as an imperfection of ordinary language. (p. 49)

Recall that if the Cartesian assumption about meanings is accepted then Mill's definition of a name is refuted by the informativeness of identity statements such as 'Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens'. Why then, the authors ask, is the description theory, which accepts the Cartesian assumption about meanings, not similarly refuted by the *uninformativeness* 'Aristotle is Aristotle'? Recall that the description theory provides a finer-grained level of distinction in meaning between 'Mark Twain' and 'Samuel Clemens' because of their different associations with different definite descriptions, even though they have the same referent. However if the classical description theory is right, then, given the many senses and hence definite descriptions associated with 'Aristotle', there should be no difference in informativeness between as 'Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens' and 'Aristotle is Aristotle'. (*l.c.*)

**Unwanted necessity:** If we set aside problem of ambiguity of a name's sense and suppose instead that everyone in a given speech community associates 'Aristotle' with a unique definite description, say 'the teacher of Alexander the Great.' Then consider

(a) Aristotle taught Alexander the Great.

Now according to the classical description theory, names are abbreviated definite descriptions, therefore we can write

(b) The pupil of Plato and the teacher of Alexander the Great taught Alexander the Great.

While (a) is a contingent statement (b) seems to be *necessary*. Of course, in another world, someone else might have taught Alexander but only the teacher of Alexander could have taught Alexander, without reference to the facts. The problem with the description theory is that it generates such unwanted necessities. As the authors point out, “This problem for the classical theory rests on intuitions about modalities [as] does one recently proposed by Kripke...” (p. 49)

For the above reasons and others the classical description theory, especially the bit about names being abbreviated descriptions, creates as many problems as it solves.

### **The Modern Description Theory of Names**

According to the modern “cluster” theory of names proposed by Peter Strawson and John Searle, the meaning of a name is tied to a cluster of descriptions that express the sense of the name, which in turn determines its referent. According to Devitt & Sterelny, “the name refers to the object, if any, that *most* but not necessarily all, of those descriptions denote.” Some of these descriptions can be accorded more weight than others. Thus among the cluster of descriptions associated with the name ‘Aristotle’, ‘the systemiser of syllogistic logic’ would be accorded more weight than ‘the more famous son of the court physician to Amyntas II.’ (p. 50)

As far as understanding is concerned, “grasping the sense” of a name “requires the speaker to make a functional-role association of the name with the appropriate cluster of descriptions.” This requires that we adopt the Cartesian assumption again because, presumably, the competent speaker already, tacitly, knows that the name in question refers to the object that most of the cluster of descriptions denotes. Thus someone who correctly uses the name “Spiderfingers Lonergan” must already know some facts about him sufficient to *identify* him as the infamous mobster. The authors however raise some concerns with the modern theory’s view of understanding. Is it sufficient for the competent speaker to associate at least one cluster description with a name, thus reverting partially to the classical description theory? Alternatively, is it possible for the speaker to associate some description not in the cluster with a name, thus dissociating understanding from sense altogether? Either way the connection between understanding and sense (and hence reference) is left unexplained. (*l.c.*)

If we put such difficulties aside, the modern description theory overcomes several of the problems that were obstacles to the classical description theory. It does so 1) by not requiring a unique definite description be associated with a name, with the former bearing the burden of reference. Instead the burden of reference is born by the cluster. 2) The problem of unwanted ambiguities is overturned because all, or many, of the different descriptions associated with a name within a speech community are accommodated within the cluster. 3) The problem of unwanted necessities is not inevitable because the modern theory does not require that *all* the descriptions in the cluster denote the individual who bears the name. If, for example, the description ‘the teacher of Alexander’ is in the cluster and expresses part of the sense of ‘Aristotle’, it might be one of the peripheral descriptions that does not denote Aristotle, in which case it could be true that Aristotle did not teach Alexander. (p. 50 - 51)

However, where the modern description theory is an improvement on the classical one, it generates a set of problems analogous to those of its predecessor. They are again:

**Principled bias:** Not every description associated with a name will be accommodated within the cluster while some descriptions will be more central to defining a name. “What” the authors ask, “is the principled basis of this selection?” Either the modern theorists will fall back on the classical definition or embrace a sort of holism in which every associated description is accommodated within the cluster. The authors find the latter “implausible”, if only because “every change in belief about the bearer changes the meaning of the name.” However this could be realised by a system of weighting so that significant changes to associations central to the cluster result in the greatest changes to the meaning, while tenuous changes to associations more peripheral to the cluster will scarcely have any perceptible change to the meaning of a name. Of course, then one has to ask, who or what will be the arbiter of such a weighting scheme? Somewhat tangentially, we already have machine learning algorithms at the heart of search engines that carry out such functions, but then they are not natural language systems with which we are presently concerned. (p. 51)

**Unwanted ambiguity:** Whatever principled bias there may be is unlikely to select the same cluster of associations for all speech communities or even for every user of a name. Therefore the name ‘Aristotle’ may still be ambiguous in a relative way. However, it could be argued that this is a very natural result as the name ‘Aristotle’ surely has a much richer and broad meaning to a professor of philosophy compared, say, to the man on the street. (*l.c.*)

**Unwanted necessity:** It is a matter of historical contingency that Aristotle had any one or other property. But according to the modern theory it is not contingent that Aristotle had *most* of the properties picked out by the cluster of descriptions associated with his name. Therefore, while

(a) Aristotle taught Alexander the Great

is contingent,

(c) Aristotle had most of the following properties: born in Stagira, pupil of Plato, author of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, systematiser of syllogistic logic, teacher of Alexander the Great...

should be necessary. Yet according to Kripke (1980) Aristotle might not have had any of these properties, therefore just like the classical theory of descriptions, the modern theory also yields unwanted necessities. However, as the authors point out, Kripke’s argument relies on modal intuitions that not all philosophers share. Well before Kripke’s argument, John Searle accepted necessity as a *feature* of the modern theory rather than an obstacle. According to Searle:

it is a necessary fact that Aristotle has the logical sum, inclusive disjunction, of properties commonly attributed to him: any individual not having some of these properties could not be Aristotle (1958, p. 160)

Devitt & Sterelny describe two further problems for the modern theory of descriptions that are not analogous the classical theory. (*l.c.*)

**Lost rigidity:** As we have mentioned before, Kripke regards names as rigid designators. As before, this rests on some modal intuitions. For a term to be a **rigid designator** it must designate the same object in every possible world where it designates at all. Alternatively, “for it to be such that ‘*a* is *F*’

would truly characterize some counterfactual situation, if and only if, the object that the term *actually* designates is *F* in that situation.” Compare the following statements under the classical theory, for the sake of simplicity:

(d) Aristotle was fond of dogs.

(e) The pupil of Plato and the teacher of Alexander the Great was fond of dogs. (p. 52)

In another world Aristotle might have died in young and would never have taught Alexander, who might instead have been taught by another of Plato’s pupils. In that world the truth of (d) would still depend on whether or not that Aristotle was fond of dogs. The truth of (e) however would depend on whether another pupil of Plato was fond of dogs. So in the counterfactual situation, the name ‘Aristotle’ still designates Aristotle, however ‘the teacher of Alexander the Great’ designates whoever taught him, whether or not it was Aristotle. Therefore, the name ‘Aristotle’ does not abbreviate the description, ‘the teacher of Alexander the Great’, nor indeed any other description that we may associate with the sense of the name.

Consider the following subjunctive counterfactuals:

(f) Aristotle might not have been Aristotle.

(g) Aristotle might not have been the pupil of Plato and the teacher of Alexander the Great.

While (g) is true even in our own world, (f) could not be true in any world in which there was such an individual. Who could Aristotle have been except himself? Of course Aristotle might have been known by another name, but that is beside the point. (*l.c.*)

Kripke proposed a way of avoiding the problems of unwanted necessity and of lost rigidity for description theory. If we decouple the theory of description from sense, which determines reference, and instead apply it *only* to reference, then a name refers only to what is picked out by the associated description, with the latter being mum to meaning. In which case, neither the problem of unwanted necessity nor that of lost rigidity arises because the semantic component of a name has nothing to do with its associated description. Kripke’s proposal however does not alleviate the problems of principled bias or unwarranted necessity and, according to the authors, it creates two further problems. (p. 53)

As we have seen, the description theory takes the Cartesian assumption for granted. If a description or even a cluster description determines a name’s reference, then a competent speaker must already (tacitly) know that it does. But such knowledge is *a priori*, therefore to understand a name such as ‘Aristotle’ it would be sufficient to know that (a) or (c). However both (a) and (c) are contingent, not necessary, therefore either such knowledge is not *a priori* or, as Kripke argues, there are some propositions that are contingent *a priori*. However, the existence of the latter is controversial. (*l.c.*)

Decoupling the theory of description from sense however leads to a seriously impoverished theory. As the authors ask, “If a reference-determining cluster of descriptions does not give the sense of a name, what does?” In Classic Text 17 we saw that Frege introduced senses to explain several linguistic problems including providing a finer-grained level of meaning concerned with intension or

the concept that a term evokes. This solved several of the problems concerned with identity statements, for example. However we still need senses to fulfil that role, though getting rid of Frege's idea, that sense determines reference, would require that meaning be independent of reference, quite the opposite of an improvement on the theory. (p. 53)

The authors suggest that a better way of avoiding the problems of unwanted ambiguity and lost rigidity would be to modify the description theory so that names are synonymous with ***rigidified descriptions***. A 'rigidity operator' might be expressed as follows by the italicised portion of the description: 'the person who, *in the actual world*, was the pupil of Plato and the teacher of Alexander the Great.' Instead of denoting Aristotle in every possible world, the rigidified description limits it to just our world making the name synonymous with the description. (p. 53 - 54)

In Classic Text 17 we described some of the characteristics of human language as arbitrary, learned, stimulus-independent and abstract, *inter alia*. And while the cluster theory of descriptions accommodates the first three characteristics, it does less well with the latter. In the example of 'Orson weighs 130kg', the proposition expressed is clearly about Orson alone. However on the cluster theory of descriptions the proposition would be concerned with the whole cluster of significant characterisations about Orson including his nature and biography. (p. 54)

While the authors do not regard any of the above objections, on their own, as inimical to the description theory, either classical or modern, especially in the absence of a suitable alternative, they do regard Kripke's problem of ignorance and error, below, as "catastrophic" for either. Donnellan (1972) offered a similar argument, however Kripke's is the one that is usually taught at undergraduate level.

### **Ignorance and Error**

Kripke defines the central tenant of all description theories, including those that are only about reference, as follows:

For any name token '*a*' and object *x*, '*a*' designates *x* if and only if *x* is denoted by a weighted most of the definite descriptions associated with '*a*' by the speaker.

It does not matter that the classical theory does not have a weighting system according to this formulation. The former can simply be thought of as assigning a non-zero weight to one description only, whereas more modern cluster theories assign different weights to all or just a few proximate descriptions.

Over the space of about 12 pages of examples in *Naming and Necessity*, which is actually the transcript of three lectures given at Princeton in 1970, Kripke demonstrates that for a name to designate an object, it is *neither necessary nor sufficient* for a competent speaker to associate the name with the definite description(s) that denote the object. As a consequence of this, Devitt & Sterelny observe that,

Given that the association of a description with a name yields a belief, and that a description that denotes an object identifies it, we can say that Kripke showed that it is neither necessary nor sufficient for the speaker to have beliefs that identify the object. He also



concluded that the associated descriptions do not determine reference. So they do not express the sense which determines reference. (p. 54)

We have already seen that description theories rely heavily on the Cartesian assumption that we automatically have “privileged access” to the contents of our own mind, including those of reference-determining beliefs, which must not only count as beliefs but as knowledge, hence they must be justified. This idea has placed an enormous epistemic burden on the on the competent speaker because “*How else* could a speaker’s act of reference pick out a particular object?” Kripke showed that this “truism” is in fact false. (p. 55)

### **Identifying Beliefs are not Necessary**

Some people have heard of the name ‘Cicero’ and correctly refer to him by that name. They may associate him with the description ‘is Tully’ or ‘the denouncer of Catiline’; however these descriptions are inappropriate because they contain other names for which other descriptions must be found. Of course the descriptions ‘Tully is Cicero’ or ‘Tully is the denouncer of Catiline’ don’t help either because they are circular. So unless one is a Classics scholar, it is unlikely that most people will be able to supply the correct description that identifies the referent of Cicero. Even those who took Latin at school and were required to read Cicero would find it difficult to produce a *name free* identifying description. (*l.c.*)

Everybody, by contrast, has heard of Einstein but which description(s) correctly identify him? Presumably: ‘the discoverer of the Theory of Relativity,’ but then the latter (of which there are two,) need to be identified independently of Einstein, something that few of us could manage. What these two examples show is that description theories require people to refer to names with factual beliefs that they seldom have, hence the problem of *ignorance*. As the authors point out, description theories also seriously underestimate the number of false beliefs that people hold, hence the problem of *error*. Many people, for example, falsely believe that Einstein invented the atomic bomb or that Columbus was the first person to circumnavigate the globe. Yet these same people still succeed in referring to Einstein or Columbus when they say such things as: “Einstein was a genius” or “A city in Ohio is named after Columbus”. (p. 55 - 56)

Although these are examples of *actual* error, Kripke demonstrated that the mere *possibly* of error is sufficient to establish that it is not necessary to have beliefs that identify a bearer’s name. Consider Wittgenstein’s example of Moses. Suppose that researchers discover that no historical figure actually fits the descriptions normally associated with ‘Moses’ such as: ‘the man who lead the Israelites out of Egypt’ or ‘the man who, as a child, was taken out of the Nile by Pharos’s daughter’ *etc.* We would probably conclude that there was no such person as Moses and, following the discussion in Classic Text 17, that ‘Moses’ is an empty name denoting no one or nothing. And so we should according to description theories. However according to Kripke, we are missing another possibility. (p. 56)

It is similarly unlikely that the biblical story of Jonah is true of any historical figure... that he was swallowed by a big fish and lived in its belly before being spat out on the shore *etc.* According to Kripke, it does not necessarily follow that ‘Jonah’ is an empty name. What if it were discovered that there was an historical man by the name of ‘Jonah’ around whom a legend grew? In that case our use of the name ‘Jonah’ designates just such a man (around whom the legend grew.) Earlier

predications using the name, such as those in the Bible, would then be false, not meaningless, because the man they refer to lacked the properties associated with him in the legend. On the other hand, predications subsequent to the discovery, reflecting the deflation of the legend would be true.

For description theories on this scenario however, earlier uses of 'Jonah' must point to it being an empty name because people's beliefs involving the name failed to identify anyone. Furthermore none of the earlier predications about him could have been true - not even trivial ones such as him being a man or human. Nor, since the discovery, could we talk about replacing a false theory about Jonah with a true theory, because, according to description theory, earlier theories cannot even have been *about* Jonah because they deny the descriptions on which our use of the name depends. (p. 56)

The possibility of the Jonah case is not "fanciful" as the authors point out. Indeed the legend of King Arthur is similarly thought to have grown around a real, though less colourful, historical figure. Kripke's purpose however was to show that it is not necessary to have identifying beliefs about a name in order to designate an object or a person, as would be required by description theories. In fact we can even do so in a state of ignorance or error. (p. 56 - 57)

### **Identifying Beliefs are not Sufficient**

Consider the following unlikely but plausible scenario: A deluded man addresses an audience relating a vivid dream that he had had which he believes was true. The man is quite convincing with the result that audience believes his narrative and passes it on to others. Per chance, there are some people, unbeknownst to the man, who fit the description of the characters in the narrative. The authors ask, "*Must* we say that the narrator (and thence his audience) was talking about those people?" We might be tempted to say so if there were striking and unexpected parallels between the characters in the narrative and those very people. Perhaps some members of the audience would be persuaded that the man possessed extrasensory perception. However there is a more likely and mundane possibility that the parallels between the characters in the narrative and those that they apparently resemble are purely a matter of chance. In which case, we would not want to say that the man was actually referring to them, despite his accurate description of them in the narrative. (p. 57)

The same is true under error. Someone who erroneously believes the description of Einstein, that he 'invented the atomic bomb' does not in fact designate Oppenheimer, who did (with others) invent the atomic bomb. Similarly, someone who erroneously associates 'Columbus' with the description 'the first man to circumnavigate the globe' does not designate Juan Sebastián Elcano. (*l.c.*)

Yet the same is true even under the possibility error, without actual error. Kripke asks us to consider the possibility that Gödel's famous incompleteness theorem (of which there are two) was actually discovered by a man named Schmidt whose body was found in Vienna under mysterious circumstances, many years ago. Suppose further that Gödel claimed the proof as his own and went on to undeserved fame at Princeton. Most students who have heard about Gödel associate his name with 'the discoverer of the incompleteness theorem', however under the fictitious possibility the description they associate with Gödel actually denotes Schmidt. Yet we do not want to say that their use of 'Gödel' designates Schmidt. If Kripke's little tale were true then their assertion that 'Gödel discovered the incompleteness theorem' would be false of Gödel but true of Schmidt. (*l.c.*)

According to the authors, what these examples demonstrate is that “even when a speaker’s beliefs involving a name succeed in identifying an individual, the name may not refer to that individual. [Therefore] identifying beliefs are no more sufficient for reference than they are necessary. (*l.c.*)

### Reference Borrowing

The way that the authors have (perhaps deliberately) presented description theories so far suggests that each of us has his or her own identifying descriptions that determine reference. But what if we can borrow reference from others? That much seems plausible. When someone reads an encyclopaedia entry about a famous classical author that he had not previously heard of he or she can correctly refer to that author by name by relying on information in the text. This does happen, probably more often than we are aware of, however it does not save description theories. If anything it makes them worse! (p. 58)

Suppose that yesterday Alice heard George talking enthusiastically about someone called ‘Joshua’. Alice has no idea who Joshua is but today she natters on about him with others. Her natter today meets the requirement of description theories in that she associates the name ‘Joshua’ with the description ‘the person George was referring to yesterday by ‘Joshua’’. Of course this will only work if Alice can support her use of ‘George’ with her own description and because George, in turn, can identify Joshua. This can be taken to any lengths because Alice can talk to Bob and Bob can talk to Cathy and so on, each person designating Joshua in virtue of associating his name with a description that refers to the previous person in the chain of gossip. (*l.c.*)

The idea of a chain of reference is an acceptable account of reference borrowing, however it exacerbates the problems of principled bias and unwanted ambiguity. Firstly, what was already a problem in choosing a principled bias from a number of associated descriptions suddenly balloons to include many more reference borrowing descriptions from among many people’s conversations about a bearer’s name. The authors ask, “Which of these, or which cluster of these, expresses the name’s sense for a speaker and determines her reference?” Even if we had an answer for that question, the principled bias must include reference-borrowing descriptions such as ‘the person George called ‘Joshua’ yesterday’. However, different people have different borrowing histories involving the name so the principled bias will yield different senses for the name. Moreover, these borrowed senses will differ from those original users of the name who required no reference borrowing. (*l.c.*)

Secondly, although reference borrowing does ease the problem of ignorance and error it makes the already too heavy epistemic burden of description theories even heavier. Any version of description theory, including reference borrowing, requires identifying beliefs, even when there may be none. To begin with, a borrower must remember at least one other user of the name, and not just by name but by an identifying description. This may of course lead to further rounds of reference borrowing, each in turn requiring their own identifying beliefs. On the other hand, the reference “lender” must be able either, to supply descriptions that directly identify the referent, or to remember where he or she borrowed the name from. It is likely that at least some of these rounds of reference borrowing will become circular with, for example, Cathy depending on Bob and Bob depending on Alice who might have forgotten about George but who depends Cathy instead. The referential “buck” has to stop with someone who doesn’t depend on anybody else. (p. 59)

Then there is the very human propensity to forget. Most of us have simply forgotten the beliefs that we might have had for the use of a name or where got the name from. Other times we may remember but may not be able supply identifying descriptions, or if we can, they may be for the wrong person. Alternatively, if we can identify the right person, that person may himself have trouble correctly identifying the bearer of a name, and so on. Again, the authors note, “The epistemic burden of description theory is still too heavy.” (p. 59)

Finally, the examples mentioned that appear to militate against description theories rely upon our intuitive judgements about particular cases. However, as we saw in Classic text 17, the first characteristic of human language listed was that of stimulus independence. Natural language does not tie us to the here and now. We can speak of places and events elsewhere and at other times. In fact, we sometimes even speak about purely abstract or hypothetical entities that may or may not exist or, in the case of impossible entities, that may not exist. Description theories however limit us to names that we can actually refer to and accurately describe. Yet as the objects of our language become increasingly removed, our relations to them became increasingly tenuous. Similarly, the quality of our information links to them becomes degraded, less reliable and more likely to lead to ignorance and error on our part. (*l.c.*)

### Rejecting Description Theories

Devitt & Sterelny make their view clear, “that description theories of names are wrong not merely in details but in fundamentals. The whole program is mistaken.” Even if one agrees with some of the strongest objections, such as those of Kripke concerning ignorance and error, there is still room to maneuver in such a way that some modified version of description theory can be salvaged. One way the authors suggest involves denying the evidence by, for example, insisting that “The ignorant do *not* designate Einstein.” The remainder of the chapter however is concerned with showing how description theories are essentially limited. (p. 59 - 60)

Even if one is prepared to disregard Kripke’s objections and accept the onerous epistemic burden, description theories would still be essentially incomplete. Description theories purport to show how the referential properties of one category of linguistic terms, *i.e.* names are explained by another category of linguistic terms, *i.e.* definite descriptions. Recall that, according to the classical theory, ‘*a*’ designates *x* in virtue of being associated with ‘the *F*’ which denotes *x*. The referential properties of the latter are explained, in turn, by those of general terms such that ‘the *F*’ denotes *x* in virtue of the fact that that ‘*F*’ applies to *x* and to nothing else. So we have designation explained in terms of denotation and denotation explained in terms of application of general terms. But what about general terms? “In virtue of what,” the authors ask “does ‘*F*’ apply to *F*s?” It is possible to give a piece meal account of *some* general terms such as ‘a bachelor is an unmarried man’ but there must be some terms whose referential properties are not dependent on others. If there are no such terms and all referential properties are dependent on other terms without end, then language need have no traction with reality. One again, the referential “buck” has to stop somewhere. (p. 60)

Of course, this does not show that description theory is necessarily wrong *ab initio*, only it postpones matters until such time as we have some sort of nondescription theory in the end. Therefore we should be receptive to such an idea if it is needed in a particular case. The authors also caution that we should be sceptical about attempts to “patch up” description theories that avoid or ignore the problems of ignorance and error. They also caution that we should be sceptical of the following two

versions of description theory, namely “circular descriptivism” and “causal descriptivism”. However let us evaluate them for ourselves first. (*l.c.*)

According “circular descriptivism” the description required for a term is constructed around the very semantic relation we are seeking to explain. If we ask, “In virtue of what does ‘Einstein’ designate Einstein?” Then the theory answers, “Because speakers associate ‘Einstein’ with the description, ‘the object designated by (or called by or named by *etc.*) ‘Einstein’ and because that description denotes Einstein.” We can see why the process is circular because the theory passes the referential “buck” to the description, which then raises the question, “In virtue of what does ‘the object designated by ‘Einstein’ *denote* Einstein?” This, in turn, raises the question, “In virtue of what does the term ‘designate’ *apply to* a relation obtaining between ‘Einstein’ and Einstein?” So, if this version of description theory were *the* correct theory of reference for names, then the relation in the previous sentence would have to be the very relation between a name and its bearer that we sought to explain in the first place. Hence, the theory in question is not just circular but question begging. (p. 60 - 61)

“Causal descriptivism”, on the other hand, is built around a variety of non-description theory of designation that relies on the causal relation between a term and what it designates. Thus ‘Einstein’ designates Einstein in virtue of ‘Einstein’ standing in some causal relation  $R$  to Einstein. According to the authors, “Causal descriptivism adapts this claim to its own purposes by building the description it needs around *the term for* this relation.” Thus ‘Einstein’ designates Einstein in virtue of standing in relation  $R$  to him. Hence ‘Einstein’ designates Einstein in virtue of ‘the object that ‘Einstein’ stands in relation  $R$  to’ denoting him. Some philosophers of language who accept causal theories which are intended to replace descriptive theories (see in the next Philosophy of Language Classic Text) instead rely on the former to save the latter. They claim, for example, that people associate ‘Einstein’ with a description such as ‘the cause of my ‘Einstein’ talk’ and that it is this description that determines the reference of ‘Einstein’. (p. 61)

“This is ingenious,” the authors claim in feigned surprise. If causal descriptivism builds its description around the term ‘ $R$ ’ borrowed from a non-description theory of designation that is intended to replace it, then such a theorist must either accept that the causal descriptivist’s description does indeed denote its referent or abandon her own non-description theory. As the authors point out, there is something “fishy” about this. Firstly, it is redundant. If a speaker is required to associate a certain “‘ $R$ ’-description” with ‘Einstein’, then claiming that the ‘ $R$ ’-description denotes the referent of ‘Einstein’ is superfluous because the causal descriptivist already accepts that ‘Einstein’ stands in a unique relation  $R$  to the referent, Einstein. The latter on its own is sufficient to explain reference without requiring a speaker to make any ‘ $R$ ’-description associations. (*l.c.*)

Secondly, although causal descriptivism was intended to side-step problems of ignorance and error it creates its own more serious epistemic problems. If causal descriptivism is correct then everyone who designates anything must have a theory of designation and that theory must be right! Moreover, anyone who uses a name must be able to provide a description that correctly explains the referent of the name and hence must “know the right ‘ $R$ ’”. Once again, this is far too heavy an epistemic burden. (*l.c.*)

Devitt & Sterelny briefly touch on another nondescription theory that has been developed from Frege’s discussion of names. According to “identification theory”, a speaker need not be able to

*describe* the bearer of a name so long as she is able to *recognize* him, as in a lineup, for example, by saying, "That person!" Identification theory thus increases the value of reference borrowing because the lenders of reference may be people we can identify but not necessarily describe. However, there is a limit to the number of people we could recognise. Beyond our family and associates and perhaps a few celebrities, few of us would be able to identify historical figures like Cicero or even Aristotle in this way. Then there are those whose names we can remember but whom we can hardly recall, and even when we think we can, we sometimes make mistakes. Therefore, identification theory suffers from its own issues of ignorance and error, but to a lesser degree than description theory. (p. 61 - 62)

What is instructive about identification theory, compared to description theories of names, is that the former uses a *demonstrative* (That person!) rather than a definite description to determine reference. Also the information that a speaker associates with a name under identification theory may be perceptual or discriminative rather than linguistic. Irrespective of whether or not the identification theory of names is *the* correct one, the authors point out that, "In thus appealing to nondescriptive mechanisms to explain reference, the identification theory implicitly acknowledges the incompleteness of the description theories." (p. 62)

Finally, consider Hilary Putnam's (1975) famous "Twin Earth" example adapted by the authors for proper names. Putnam asks us to imagine that somewhere in the universe there is planet called 'Twin Earth'. As its name suggests 'Twin Earth' is just like our Earth in every respect, right down to the existence of a molecule for molecule double of every Earthling. Each *doppelgänger* (from German: literally "double-goer") that is a double of an English speaking Earthling speaks a language that is phonologically and syntactically the same as English. However Putnam's point is that their language would not be semantically the same, at least not for names because they are referentially different. When an Earthling uses a name in English he refers to someone by that name on Earth, whereas when his *doppelgänger* uses the same name he refers to someone by that name on Twin Earth. Thus, where Fred declares: "I love Gaga. She is outrageously entertaining", he is referring to the earthly Gaga. However, when Fred's *doppelgänger* declares: "I love Gaga. She is outrageously entertaining", he is referring to Twin Earth Gaga. He has never even heard of the earthly Gaga. (p 62 - 63)

What the "Twin Earth" example shows is that there is nothing internal or intrinsic to Fred or his *doppelgänger* that determines either of their reference of 'Gaga'. The difference can't be down to neurophysiology, mental images, associations, feelings *etc.* because, recall, they are identical molecule for molecule. Instead, we must look beyond them for some relation they bare to things outside of themselves for the ultimate explanation of their meanings and reference. As Putman succinctly put it, "meanings just ain't in the *head*." (1975, p. 227)

The authors ask, "Indeed, *how could* meanings be in the head? Meaning depends on reference and reference relates a person and his word to one particular external object and not others." In the same way that salt's solubility derives *not only* from its own chemical structure but also on chemical attributes of water, so internal states *on their own* are not sufficient to determine reference, except in relation to external facts. Although an internal state of some organism may reliably reflect some aspect of reality, no internal state *on its own* can make external reality so. To suppose otherwise would be a form of magical thinking. (p. 63)

That reference depends, in part, on external facts, confirms that description theories are essentially incomplete. Meanings cannot be explained just by associations in the head of a speaker, without recourse to external reality. Moreover, because Fred and his *doppelgänger* are identical molecule for molecule, whatever associated descriptions Fred has in his head when he refers to Gaga, Fred's *doppelgänger* also has in his head when *he* refers to Gaga, and yet they both refer to different people. Therefore, mere association of a description with a name is not sufficient to determine reference. (p. 63)

Although it should be clear by now that description theory is dead and cannot be revived by any further qualifications, aspects of the theory survive in the Causal Theory of Reference which is the subject of the author's next chapter. These include: the idea that we must have some true beliefs about an entity to refer to it by name; the fact of reference borrowing; that our ability to use language is, in part, a social capacity and so on. (p. 63 - 64) That theory will be covered in our next classic text on the philosophy of language.

### Task

1. Devitt & Sterelny's (1999) book that we are using as a text is entitled "Language and Reality..." Presumably, those two concepts are primarily what the authors intended to address in their writing. So in their adapted version of Putman's "Twin-Earth" analogy, do you think that he (or they) are making a point only about semantics or about language and reality also?
2. We have briefly encountered some of Saul Kripke's arguments from his *Naming and Necessity* (1980). Though Kripke has been reluctant to publish, his influence on Western Philosophy has been enormous, especially in the fields of mathematical logic, set theory, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of language, metaphysics, and epistemology. Try to find out about this distinguished contemporary philosopher. There are numerous on-line sources. (There is no specific feedback for this task.)

### Feedback

1. Not everyone agrees that Putman's "Twin-Earth" analogy necessarily demonstrates what he intended, however we are persuaded that what it does show is that meaning must be at least partly external to the organism or system generating them. Hence Putnam's conclusion that, "meanings just ain't in the *head*." Well of course they have to be partly in the head because that is where our brain is and as far as we know no other organ is involved in generating meanings. If we succeed one day in building machines that are capable of generating meanings, then presumably part of those meaning would reside in the circuitry, but only part. If language is to be of any use it cannot be solely about internal states, it must have some sort of traction with reality both in what we represent of the world and how our meanings reach out to what they refer to in the world. Natural selection has strongly favoured language acquisition in humans not because it allows us to represent internal states to ourselves (though we can do that) but because with meaningful words and gestures we can *act* in the external world. And it is those actions *inter alia* that make a unique difference to human survival and thriving. If some of our key meanings, not just linguistic, lose traction with reality as in the case of psychosis, our ability to function in the

world is severely impaired. Therefore, there can be no discussion of semantics that does not concern itself with reality. Clearly the authors have made this their central endeavour.

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