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## REFERENCE AND KNOWLEDGE OF REFERENCE

**ABSTRACT:** This paper addresses two issues: (a) Does linguistic competence with respect to a given sentence *S* (or an utterance of *S*) whose meaning is *that p* strictly require knowledge *that S means that p*? (b) Of what kind is the entity which is the subject matter of the propositions embedded in the knowledge-that attributions constituting attributions of linguistic competence? These two issues are addressed in connection to some classical problems raised by names and direct reference theory. It will be argued that in order to be linguistically competent with respect to a given name it is sufficient that a speaker internalize some appropriate description of the *name* itself.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The job of a semantic theory is to provide an algorithm that enables one to calculate the *meaning* of a potentially infinite number of sentences on the basis of the meanings of a finite number of lexical items together with a finite number of combination rules. One very common view about linguistic competence is that the capacity to understand a given language consists in the ability to derive *knowledge of the meaning* of any sentence of that language. So whereas semantic theory deals with what may be called “the metaphysics of meanings”—its subject matter

is the conventional meaning of words and sentences—the theory of linguistic competence deals with what may be called “the epistemology of meaning”—its subject matter is knowledge of the conventional meaning of words and sentences. Now a common assumption about the connection between semantics and epistemology of meaning is that, if a sentence *S* (or an utterance of *S*) means *that p*, then linguistic competence with respect to *S* can only be knowledge *that S means that p*. For instance, given that semantics determines that the sentence “John is bald” means *that John is bald*, it is assumed that understanding that sentence can only consist in the knowledge *that “John is bald” means that John is bald*.

The aim of this paper is to question some very specific aspects of this latter assumption. What will be questioned here is *not* whether it is correct to regard linguistic competence as a variety of *knowledge*. Nor will the issue be whether it is correct to regard linguistic competence as a variety of *knowledge-that* (as opposed to a variety of *know-how*). This bit will be taken for granted: linguistic competence is a variety of *knowledge-that*. The discussion will bear, instead, on the following issues: (a) Does linguistic competence with respect to a given sentence *S* whose meaning is *that p* strictly require knowledge *that S means that p* (or, to anticipate, is it sufficient to know *that S means that p'*, where *p'* is a proposition related in some appropriate way to *p*)? (b) What kind of entity (word, sentence, or something else) should be taken to be the subject matter of the propositions embedded in the knowledge-that attributions constituting attributions of linguistic competence?

These two questions will be asked in connection with some familiar problems raised by names and direct reference theory. As regards the answer to (a), I will suggest that taking linguistic competence to be descriptive knowledge of non-descriptive meanings should enable an advocate of the causal-historical picture of names to solve Frege’s puzzle. As regards the answer to (b), I will argue that linguistic competence with respect to a name *N* consists in descriptive knowledge of what *N* is. On the view to be presented here, being linguistically competent with respect to a name does not involve knowing a *singular* proposition about the name in question, but, rather, involves knowing some *general*, descriptive proposition about the name (whatever it is, in our linguistic environment) that actually satisfies a certain descrip-

tion, which itself contains a descriptive condition on the referent of the name.

## 2. FREGE'S PUZZLE AND THE CAUSAL PICTURE OF NAMES

One natural view about proper names is that they function like tags standing directly for particulars in the external world. On that view, each name designates a particular individual, independently of the properties of that individual. Frege (1892/1980) showed that, however natural, this view of names raises important puzzles. In particular, it has the consequence that all co-referential names should be synonymous, hence that all identity statements between co-referential names should be known a priori to be true, in virtue of linguistic competence alone. However, identity statements of the form 'a=b' can be informative: their truth-value may be discovered only a posteriori. Frege concluded, therefore, that co-referentiality is not sufficient for synonymy, and the natural view of names is false: the meaning of a name cannot be equated with its referent. Instead, he proposed that what names mean is a *sense*, i.e. an abstract entity playing the role of a descriptive mode of presentation of their referent, and two different names may be associated with different senses, so that even a competent speaker may fail to realize that the two names in fact have the same referent. Call this view, that names are somehow linguistically associated with descriptive modes of presentation determining their reference, "linguistic descriptivism."

Linguistic descriptivism has been attacked by philosophers like Keith Donnellan (1970), David Kaplan (1989a; 1989b), Saul Kripke (1972/1980), Hilary Putnam (1975), Nathan Salmon (1986), and Howard Wettstein (1986), among others, who imposed a new conception of reference: the causal-historical picture. Two theses characterize this picture: (1) *Referentialism*: the truth-conditional content of a name is just its referent; (2) *Causalism*: What fixes the reference of a name is a baptism, and what preserves the relation between the name and the referent is a causal chain of uses tracing back to the individual originally baptized by the name. The causal picture of reference is, then, doubly externalist: neither the content nor what fixes the content of a name is in the head of its users. The various arguments given by

advocates of this picture of names also supported a highly *social* conception of linguistic reference: the reference of a name is determined at the level of the *global* linguistic community, rather than at the local level of each individual user. Contrary to what Frege and Russell had assumed (because their analyses of language had always been determined by their primary interest in a theory of the objective contents of thought—see Wettstein 1986), the reference of a name is not mediated by some particular concept that each competent speaker should have internalized in order to master the name. The relation between a name and its referent is no longer regarded as a relation holding between the *head* of a user and an object, but is now taken to be a relation between the *name* itself, conceived of as an autonomous entity, having its own history in the social and physical environment of a linguistic community, and an object standing in some particular relation to the name itself, i.e. the object baptized by the name in the first place. Thus, what determines the linguistic reference of a given name, on this new conception, is not something inside each user but rather something *between* speakers.

This means that this picture is incompatible with any sort of linguistic descriptivism. If the causal picture is right, then descriptions play no linguistic role at all—they are neither content nor what fixes content—in the determination of the linguistic reference of a name. However—and this is where, I think, a deep misunderstanding has arisen—the causal picture of names does not entail that *mental* reference is not descriptive. This is one of the main claims of this paper. Of course, the causal picture of names entails *nothing* about mental reference at all. This is because, precisely, it is a picture of the semantics of names taken at a global, *communitarian* level, and not a picture of what is or should be in the head of a competent *individual* using names. It is a picture of the *meaning* of names, where meaning is understood to be a social or "anthropological" matter (subject to a "division of linguistic labour", in Putnam's phrase), and not a picture of the *epistemology of meaning*, whose task would be to spell out the conditions under which a given user of the name may be counted as competent. Also, and interestingly, the causal picture of names could be true even if no natural language speaker would ever have been able to entertain a singular *thought* (i.e., a thought whose truth-conditional content would directly involve some

particular individual in the outer world). The causal picture of names and the theory of mental reference are simply not related: they remain logically independent of each other.

Now it becomes obvious that one may adhere to the causal picture of names and nonetheless keep the idea that thought, in some or all cases, is descriptive. That is, one may decide to divorce the theory of linguistic reference and the theory of mental reference. It is important to realize that such a position makes a lot of sense. The various arguments given for the causal picture of names, taken all together, seem to irresistibly support the claim that the *linguistic* content of a name is an individual, and that which individual that is is not settled only by the mental states of a particular user of the name. However, Frege's puzzle, taken in the light of other considerations concerning the causal role of thoughts in reasoning and action, equally strongly indicates that reference in thought is mediated by modes of presentation. Almost everybody should agree with all this. The only assumptions which will potentially seem more controversial here are (i) the assumption that the modes of presentation in thought are *descriptive* (as opposed to *de re*, or non-descriptive), and (ii) the assumption that these modes of presentation *exhaust* the content of the corresponding thoughts (i.e., they must have the appropriate—in fact, descriptive—format to be truth-conditionally autonomous, for they do not stand in the content *along with the individual* which they present, but without, and independently of the existence of, that individual).

### 3. ABANDONING THE NAIVE PICTURE

Now, of course, the causal picture of names and the theory of mental reference will have to be connected in some way. This is because, obviously, speakers, by using sentences containing names, intend to convey certain thoughts they have. Thus, when Mary, who has just seen John and remained surprised by his capillary condition, says, "John is bald," it is most intuitive to say that what Mary meant to convey by her utterance, *hence what she thought*, was (the singular proposition) *that John is bald*. Call this 'the naive picture' of the relation between language and thought. This picture *equates* the semantic content of a sentence used by a speaker with the content of the thought this speaker intends

to literally convey by his utterance. The naive picture was naturally endorsed by many advocates of the causal picture, who have concluded that the causal picture of names was *also* a picture of names in thought. As I said, however, we have many reasons to reject this naive picture. First, in the causal picture of reference, as we saw, the relation of reference obtains between the name and the object which is its referent, not between the head of a user and this object, so that the causal picture of names does not entail anything about the nature of thoughts entertained by users of names, and can remain completely independent of any particular view of mental reference. Second, we have independent and strong reasons to reject the idea that mental reference conforms to the standards of the causal picture of linguistic reference. It is quite uncontroversial that, in thought, reference is mediated by modes of presentation at some level or other, and it remains very plausible that the real lesson of Frege's puzzle about co-reference (as well as that of Russell's puzzle about no-reference) is that these modes of presentation are descriptive modes of presentation playing the role of the truth-conditional contents of the thoughts associated with sentences containing names.

If all this is true, and the naive picture is abandoned, then we need to distinguish two levels: (1) *the semantic content of a name*, which amounts to an individual, and is determined at a social scale, as the causal picture of names says, and (2) the content of a thought entertained by a speaker using a sentence containing the name, or *mental content of the name*, which corresponds to a descriptive condition, and is determined at an idiosyncratic level, as what we may call "mental descriptivism" says. (Of course, some variation is tolerated across thinkers here. Remember Frege: different speakers may have different senses for Aristotle, so long as these all pick out Aristotle.) For instance, consider John, who is a speaker of English. John knows that the name 'Hesperus' stands for the brightest star appearing in the evening sky, and he knows that 'Phosphorus' stands for the brightest star appearing in the morning sky. John has once been acquainted with Venus but this did not help him at all realize that Hesperus is Phosphorus. John says: "Hesperus is lovely." According to the causal picture of names, the semantic content of the sentence he used is the singular proposition *that Venus is lovely*. On the other hand, according to mental descriptivism,

the thought he really entertained amounts to the general proposition *that the brightest star appearing in the evening sky (in the actual world) is lovely*. So it follows that, on this conception, John does not really understand what the sentence he used says. Can John nonetheless count as a “competent” speaker of English?

Not if we stick to the naive picture of the relation between language and thought. But once this picture is abandoned, new answers to that question become available. Linguistic competence turns out to be a very complex and subtle matter. I propose the following refinement: a speaker is linguistically competent with respect to a name if the description he has of the referent of the name is uniquely satisfied in the actual world by the object which in fact is the social referent of the name (even if that description is satisfied by another individual, or by no individual at all, in some other possible world). In other words, the speaker will be competent if the extension at the actual world of his idiosyncratic description of the referent of the name is the social referent (content) of the name. Thus, on that modified picture of competence, the semantic content of a name must correspond to the *actual* extension of the various descriptions that various speakers each associate in their own idiolect with the name. So the intension of a name in the public language is the common extension of various mental descriptions (intensions) of its referent in different idiolects.

Note that, if all this is right, then the old controversy between theorists, like Chomsky, defending the view that only idiolects can be studied scientifically, and philosophers who claim that language, because of its conventional character, can only be approached from a social perspective (for example, by observing the functions, in the biological sense, that linguistic exchanges may serve in a community—see e.g. Millikan 2003) results from a misunderstanding. Both idiolects and public language can be studied scientifically, and the theories of idiolects and public language will simply cover different phenomena, occurring at different scales. The theories do not even compete. The scales interact, of course, in that idiolects must be sufficiently alike to enable different speakers to speak about the same things by using the same words. But this, although it means that the words will have the same social function in the mouth of different speakers, does nothing to show that these different speakers, when they interpret the same

linguistic message, must come to entertain the same thoughts.

So my conclusion at this point is that it is at least plausible that linguistic competence with respect to a sentence that means *that p* should not necessarily be regarded as knowledge *that the sentence means that p*. That is, the naive picture is not the only possible picture of the relation between language and thought, and is certainly not the most plausible picture, given the combination of Kripkean arguments favouring the causal picture of names and Fregean arguments favouring mental descriptivism. I believe that by abandoning the naive picture we may also come to have a better understanding of belief reports, and of the debate (or misunderstanding) between semantic minimalists and contextualists, but these are not points I will be developing here.

#### 4. THE (CAUSAL AND MENTAL) INDIVIDUATION OF NAMES

I have taken for granted that something like the causal picture of names must be correct. Now I want to argue that this picture is not only a picture of what names *mean*, but also of what names *are*.

Remember that, as we saw, according to the causal theorist, the relation of meaning, in the case of names, holds between names and their referents, and not, as in the Frege-Russell tradition, between the head of each user and the referent. This means that names have a special ontological status in the causal picture: their meaning must be part of their identity. The identity of a given name does not change from mouth to mouth; it remains unaffected by the (potentially variable) mental states of the particular users of the name. Thus, if I am under the misapprehension that the public name ‘Aristotle’ (for the philosopher) is a name for Socrates, and I use this name in the context of a philosophical discussion with the intention to talk about Socrates, this latter intention of mine will not be satisfied. To use Kripke’s (1977) distinction, my *specific* intention to speak about Socrates will not be satisfied, simply because the name *conventionally* means Aristotle; my *general* intention to use the name ‘Aristotle’ with its conventional meaning rests on a false (specific) belief as to what that name conventionally means. By using *this* name, *given the history of this name*, I could only talk about Aristotle. My specific intention to talk about Socrates, when I use this name (with the general intention to use it as a name for

its conventional referent) is overridden by the social convention determining the referent of the name. For this to be the case, however, names must *by themselves* carry their reference. In this connection, Kaplan (1989b: 600-602) contrasts the *subjectivist* conception of meaning inherited from Frege and Russell, in which words are treated as shapes belonging to an empty syntax, which each individual then fills in with his own personal semantics, with the new, *consumerist* paradigm favoured by advocates of the causal picture of names, in which individual speakers acquire words that are *in themselves* already endowed with a social meaning:

“Contrast the view of subjectivist semantics with the view that we are, for the most part, language *consumers*. Words come to us prepackaged with a semantic value. If we are to use *those words*, the words we have received, the words of our linguistic community, then we must defer to their meaning. Otherwise we play the role of language *creators*. [...] But it should be recognized that the [subjectivist] view is incompatible with one of the most important contributions of contemporary theory of reference: the historical chain picture of the reference of names.” (Kaplan, 1989b: 602)

So the causal theorist, being consumerist, should be naturally inclined to hold the view that it is an integral part of the *metaphysical identity* of any given name that it has the social meaning it has (see also Almog 1984, Kaplan 1990). This is so because, on the consumerist account, a name comes to a consumer *already* endowed with a given meaning. Since this is true for all consumers of the name, the meaning of the name must be determined not by particular mental states, but rather by the whole history of the name itself. So we have something of a reflexive element in what determines the meaning of a name: the meaning of a name depends on the history shaping the identity of the name *itself*. This is just to say that what a name *means* depends on what a name *is*. The meaning of a name—its original referent—is an integral aspect of what individuates the name itself, and constitutes (together with its phonological shape, to some extent) what gets preserved through the history of the uses of *this* name.

So far we have established that names are individuated by their original referent. Now suppose, as before, that speakers using the name cannot form singular thoughts involving the referent of the name. It will follow that, in some important sense, such speakers will not know *which (social) name* they are using. Since names are individuated by their unique original referent, and if users of the name are unable to form singular thoughts about this referent, it will follow that they are unable to form singular thoughts about the name itself. Names exist in the social environment, and they are individuated by their causal relations to some physical objects (*viz.*, their referents). But this is only true at a social scale, from the perspective of an “omniscient observer of history” (to use Donnellan’s phrase). At a local scale, speakers do not need to know which particular relations individuate names themselves. They need not access the whole history of a name in order to master the name. They need not internalize the *particular* relations holding in the external environment between names and their referent (otherwise the causal picture of names would collapse into some metalinguistic version of linguistic descriptivism). Speakers may use *other* means to identify names, and this is where things get interesting. Although each name is individuated by only one metaphysical history, there are lots of ways in which an agent may identify it. Since names are metaphysically individuated by their phonological shape, their original referent, and the history of their uses, it will be sufficient, in order to epistemically access the name itself, to have some *description* of the name, which would itself contain descriptions of some of these three metaphysical components. In particular, it will be sufficient for John to know that ‘Hesperus’ is a name for the brightest star appearing in the evening sky, in order to identify the name *in the actual world*. And—second point of the paper—this is all he needs to master the name. For it is just a fact about us that we use names only in the actual world, and, to do this, we need to identify names only within the actual world. Whether the descriptions we use to identify the name ‘Hesperus’ are satisfied by some *other* name in some other possible world is usually irrelevant to our communicative purposes. What matters, when we use a name, are the actual properties of the name. Of course, this is not true for the objects that we talk about when we use names. We do speak and reason about the counterfactual status of the objects surrounding us in the

actual world, and of the properties they would have relative to other possible worlds, and such counterfactual talks and reasonings play a central role in our cognitive and social lives. But, except philosophers, speakers do not usually engage in speculations concerning the counterfactual properties of names: they just use them, taking them as they are in the actual world, to speak about their actual referents, and sometimes to speak about their actual referents in counterfactual worlds. (In general, as Kripke taught us, we should always be extremely cautious not to conflate the modal properties of words and the modal properties of the things meant by words.)

Sometimes, however, and even though speakers are not speaking about words, some counterfactual referent of a name may become relevant to explaining certain errors, e.g. identity mistakes. Even though what matters, to be linguistically competent, is to have some description of the name, hence have some description of the referent that is uniquely satisfied by the referent in the actual world, speakers need not know the extension of the description to master the description, hence they do not need to realize when two descriptions are satisfied by the same referent in the actual world. For this requires non-linguistic knowledge of how the actual world is. That is, as Frege had seen, one explanation of the Fregean problem. The information that, in the actual world, the brightest star appearing in the evening sky is the brightest star appearing in the morning sky, is a substantive (and contingent) piece of information about the actual world. What Frege failed to realize, though, is that this substantive piece of information may be crucial to mentally identify *names* themselves. In the situation above, it will follow from the fact that John fails to realize (the substantive fact) that the brightest star appearing in the evening sky is the brightest star appearing in the morning sky that he will also fail to realize (the linguistic fact) that the names 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' are co-referential, because he uses the substantive, descriptive information to ground his linguistic knowledge of what the names *are*.

In short, then, linguistic competence with respect to a name N requires a speaker to have descriptive knowledge of what N actually is. A sufficient condition for linguistic competence (LC) may be this:

(LC) A speaker S is competent with respect to a name N if S possesses a description of the form "there is an x, there

is a y, such that x is a name with the phonological shape 'N' and x has the referent y, such that y is the unique object which is F (in the actual world)".

Of course, it is a consequence of this condition that if no, or more than one, referent has the substantive property F, or if no, or more than one, name satisfies the whole formula, then S is not linguistically competent (which is still not to say that his thoughts are empty, or problematic in any way).

## 5. CONCLUSION

I have argued that (a) linguistic competence with respect to a name N need not be regarded as knowledge of the linguistic content of N, but may instead be taken to be knowledge of some appropriate description of the linguistic content of N, and that (b) the subject matter of propositions whose knowledge constitutes linguistic competence with respect to names is not the name itself, but rather *whatever name* satisfies a certain description in the actual world. In other words, such propositions are general propositions about names. To make these points, I have argued that (i) the causal picture of names is correct, that (ii) this causal picture entails nothing about mental reference, that (iii) we have good reasons to abandon the naive view that the mental content associated with a name by a competent speaker just *is* the semantic (social) content of the name, and that (iv) it follows from the causal picture of names that names are individuated by their meaning and history, so that if the non-descriptive meaning of a name is known only by description, then the name itself will be known only by description.

## Notes

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## References