Philosophy of Language U73126
Lecture 2

Proper Names: Kripke’s Naming and Necessity

1. A critique of descriptivism

Recall that descriptivism about proper names is the view that there is a descriptive component to the meaning of proper names, which determines denotation/reference. For example, perhaps:

- “J.K. Rowling” has a sense — such as the author of the Harry Potter series — which determines the reference of the name, and is the component of meaning with cognitive significance. Or:
- “J.K. Rowling” is an abbreviated definite description, such as “the author of the Harry Potter series”.

In Saul Kripke’s Naming and Necessity (1972/1980), a range of hugely influential arguments were raised against descriptivism. We will look at the three most important arguments.

1.1 The modal argument

Consider the following two sentences.

(1) J.K. Rowling could have not authored the Harry Potter series.
(2) J.K. Rowling could have not been J.K. Rowling.

Intuitively, (1) is true and (2) is false. Had J.K. Rowling not had the right inspiration at the right time, she might not have authored any books about wizards. But J.K. Rowling couldn’t have failed to be J.K. Rowling.

But according to descriptivism, we should have the same intuition for both (1) and (2) — whether it is because the (cognitively significant) sense of “J.K. Rowling” is the author of the Harry Potter series, or because “J.K. Rowling” abbreviates “the author of the Harry Potter series”. So descriptivism makes incorrect predictions and is false.

What if you think that I’ve picked the wrong description? Then try other descriptions that you associate with “J.K. Rowling”. According to Kripke, whatever description you choose, J.K. Rowling could have not satisfied it.

(Aside: in light of such considerations, Kripke claims that names are rigid designators. This means that, whatever possible scenario (or possible world) we’re talking about, proper names refer to the same thing. For example, we describe a scenario in which Angela Merkel is called “Angela Voller” by saying that Angela Merkel is called “Angela Voller”.)

1.2 The argument from ignorance

Suppose you were to say the following.

(3) Richard Feynman was a physicist.
If you were to say (3), then you would have successfully used “Richard Feynman” to say something true about a particular person. But can you provide a description that uniquely picks him out? According to Kripke (and also Donnellan (Proper names and identifying descriptions, 1970)), we can use names even if we cannot provide an identifying definite description of the denotation/reference. But this contradicts descriptivism.

1.3 The argument from error

Most people, if they have heard of Kurt Gödel, know of him only as the mathematician who proved the incompleteness theorems. So let us suppose that most people associate “Gödel” with the description “the mathematician who proved the incompleteness theorems”.

   Kripke asks us to imagine a fictional scenario in which, unbeknownst to the public, the theorems were in fact proved by a mathematician named “Schmidt”, but Schmidt died in mysterious circumstances before Gödel found and took credit for the proofs. Now, suppose that a typical person in this fictional scenario uses the name “Gödel”. Who does she refer to? According to Kripke, she refers to Gödel. But descriptivism predicts that she is referring to the person who proved the incompleteness theorems – who, in our fictional scenario, is Schmidt. Thus, Kripke concludes, descriptivism is false.

2. The causal-historical theory of reference

We can think of any version of descriptivism about proper names as having at least two components. First: one aspect of the meaning of a proper name is a description. Second: the descriptive aspect of the meaning is what determines the reference (or denotation) of the proper name. Kripke’s arguments purport to undermine both of those components.

   Terminology. Let us call a theory about what determines the reference of a proper name a theory of reference; and the second component of descriptivism (the claim that the reference of proper names are determined by associated descriptions) the descriptivist theory of reference.

   Now, after arguing against descriptivism, Kripke seeks to replace only its second component, namely the descriptivist theory of reference. He seeks to replace it with an alternative theory about how reference is determined.

   The causal-historical theory of reference: when used, a proper name refers to x if there is a causal-historical chain of reference-preserving links leading back to an appropriate baptism of x.

Here, a ‘reference-preserving link’ might (for example) involve one speaker learning the proper name from another speaker. Note that ‘baptism’ should be understood loosely – it needn’t be a single event but may be a gradual process.

   For example: my parents decided to call me “Mark” as a newborn child, and they could subsequently use “Mark” to refer to me; through conversation (etc.) others ‘learnt’ the name, from whom others ‘learnt’ the name, and now lots of people can use “Mark” to refer to me.

   As it stands, the causal-historical theory of reference needs additional details. For example, if I had been named after someone else called “Mark”, presumably that would not be a reference-preserving link. (You don’t use “Mark” to refer to them simply in virtue of knowing my name.) And, even if there is a causal-historical chain leading from “Santa Claus” back to St. Nicholas, presumably one of the links is not reference-preserving. (You don’t use “Santa Claus” to refer to St. Nicholas, otherwise “Santa was real” would be true.) So what makes a particular link reference-preserving?
Note also that the causal-historical theory of reference doesn’t tell us what the meaning of a proper name is. So while it helps us understand how we can talk about the outside world, the causal-historical theory of reference is not the full story. Many theorists (e.g. Scott Soames, Robin Jeshion) are persuaded to supplement the view with Millianism (which is often now called a direct reference theory of names). But then they must once again face Frege’s puzzle.

Gareth Evans (The Causal Theory of Names, 1973) raises an important objection. Apparently, “Madagascar” was originally the name for a portion of mainland Africa, but (due to a misunderstanding of Marco Polo’s) was taken to refer to the large island instead. Taken at face value, the causal-historical theory of reference may appear to imply that our uses of “Madagascar” refer to a portion of mainland Africa. But presumably that is false.

3. Experimental evidence

Kripke’s arguments seem to appeal to intuitions: intuitions about the truth value of sentences (§1.1) and intuitions about what someone would refer to in a particular scenario (§§1.2–1.3). But, if intuitions matter, why are Kripke’s the important ones? What if other people have different intuitions?

In some intriguing experiments, Edouard Machery, Ron Mallon, Shaun Nichols, Stephen Stich and others have presented evidence that there is cross-cultural variation in referential intuitions.

A referential intuition is an intuition about what a proper name refers to (as it is used on a particular occasion).

Machery, Mallon, Nichols and Stich (Semantics, cross cultural style, 2004) presented American and Chinese students with prompts such as the following:

Suppose that John has learned in college that Gödel is the man who proved an important mathematical theorem, called the incompleteness of arithmetic. John is quite good at mathematics and he can give an accurate statement of the incompleteness theorem, which he attributes to Gödel as the discoverer. But this is the only thing that he has heard about Gödel. Now suppose that Gödel was not the author of this theorem. A man called “Schmidt”, whose body was found in Vienna under mysterious circumstances many years ago, actually did the work in question. His friend Gödel somehow got hold of the manuscript and claimed credit for the work, which was thereafter attributed to Gödel. Thus, he has been known as the man who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic. Most people who have heard the name “Gödel” are like John; the claim that Gödel discovered the incompleteness theorem is the only thing they have ever heard about Gödel. When John uses the name “Gödel”, is he talking about:

(A) the person who really discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic? or
(B) the person who got hold of the manuscript and claimed credit for the work?

Surprisingly, the Chinese participants were more likely to choose (A), whereas the American participants were more likely to choose (B). This suggests that the Chinese participants were more likely to have referential intuitions predicted by the descriptivist theory of reference, whereas the American participants were more likely to have referential intuitions predicted by the causal-historical theory of reference. Further experiments have yielded results consistent with this conclusion.

What does this evidence show?

- Nothing? Perhaps language use, not ref. intuitions, is what we really care about. (Martí.)
- Not much? Perhaps expert referential intuitions are more important. (Devitt.)
- A lot? Perhaps they show that how we refer is relative to culture! (Andow?)