Intentional Content and Necessity

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The problem of proper names, as it is called, is a critical obstacle to any semantic account of language (Searle 205). There are intuitive proper names, such as "Bob," "Sally," or "Napoleon," but there are other, more prolific words that also act like proper names, such as "green," "horse," or "straw." The problem of proper names is ultimately a problem of how reference occurs. In other words, when I say something involving a name, how do I posit something involving an object? Gottlob Frege founded an early and influential theory of reference which came to be known as descriptivism due to its associating each name with a definite description which functioned as that name's "sense." Saul Kripke, in Naming and Necessity, criticizes the descriptivist theory of reference and offers (despite his best intentions) a theory of his own which has come to be known as the causal theory of reference. Kripke's theory solves many of the suggested descriptivist problems in historical reference but is narrower the descriptivist picture. John Searle, in "Proper Names and Intentionality," claims that Kripke's picture is compatible with a different version of descriptivism and defends descriptivism from Kripke's criticism.

I think that Searle's theory can be interpreted as a powerful union of the strengths of descriptivism and the causal theory. I will present both

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theories and examine two of Kripke's key criticisms of descriptivism, the problem of necessary attributes and the problem of misreference, as well as Searle's response. Searle ultimately fails to defend the priority of intentional content as a justification for his view, so I will do this in the last section of my paper. Whether Searle's intended defense of descriptivism actually manages to support that specific theory or not, he at least provides a useful reduction of Kripke's picture of reference that preserves the strength of the descriptivist view.

1. Descriptivism and Kripke's Criticisms

According to descriptivism, a proper name refers to an object by means of an associated description which uniquely picks out the object.[1] For example, "Aristotle" refers to Aristotle because he answers to the description, "the famous student of Plato," which is associated with that name. A more complex version of descriptivism states that, for example, "Aristotle" is associated with a cluster of descriptions ("the famous student of Plato," "the tutor of Alexander," "the founder of the Lyceum," etc.). An object must be described by most or a weighted most of the descriptions in the cluster in order to be the name's referent (Kripke 64).

Though Kripke gives several criticisms of descriptivism, I will focus on only two. Firstly, if descriptivism implies that a name's meaning is some definite description, then the theory makes certain properties of individuals necessary, which intuitively seem contingent (Kripke 57–58).[2] For example, suppose that the meaning of "Shakespeare" is "the most famous English playwright." Then it seems necessary that Shakespeare was a playwright, even though it seems possible Shakespeare may have gone into a different profession. If someone asks the question, "what if Shakespeare had gone into woodworking?" it would seem strange to respond either, "that's impossible," or, "then another man would have been Shakespeare." However, it

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[1] In Frege's theory, the relationship between proper name and description is that the description is the *meaning* of the name. I am using the broader term "association" here to make room for Searle's break from Frege's theory.

[2] To briefly describe what is meant by necessity and contingency: an object necessarily has a property if that object could not fail to have that property and remain what it is. An object contingently has a property if that object could fail to have that property and remain what it is. For example, it seems that grass could be other than green (if things had gone differently or on some other world), but it does not seem that grass could have been other than a plant. To exemplify this intuition (and as a quick rule of thumb), if someone were to ask, "what if grass were pink?" I would give them an answer, whereas if someone asked, "what if grass weren't a plant?" I would stare at them, bemused.

seems impossible to answer the question otherwise if "Shakespeare" simply means "the most famous English playwright."

Kripke acknowledges that this objection only applies if descriptivism holds that the definite description associated with a name is that name's meaning (65). Descriptivism might, he concedes, be simply used as a theory for picking out a referent. If that is the case, then a descriptivist could posit a counterfactual situation about Shakespeare by using the definite description, "the most famous English playwright," merely to pick out that man and then make suppositions about him which may violate the original description. On this picture of descriptivism, it is not necessary that Shakespeare was the most famous English playwright, but "the most famous English playwright" is the description by which we get at the man in question.[3]

The second of Kripke's criticisms is that, since we could be wrong about what answers to the description associated with a name, we could be referring incorrectly without knowing it. For example, if the description associated with the name "tomato" is "a sweet, red vegetable," and we discover (as some people seem to think they have done) that the things people commonly call tomatoes are really fruits, then our references to tomatoes have surprisingly been failing all these years. Suppose we were to discover that Red Delicious apples were in fact vegetables (due, perhaps, to the lack of pleasure given in eating them). Perhaps every time we thought we were talking about the grape-sized things in our salad we were actually referring to the baseball-sized things on our countertops. This seems plainly ridiculous. We may be wrong about whether tomatoes are vegetables or fruits, but when we point and say "tomato" we are generally not mistaken.

Kripke presents a thought experiment as an example of this failure of descriptivism. In the example, Kurt Gödel actually stole his work from another man Schmidt, who turned up mysteriously dead in a river days after its publication. Jones knows Gödel (as some ordinary speakers do) only as

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[3]Kripke further argues that, if descriptivism is merely a theory of reference, then it cannot solve the old puzzle of identity statements. Searle writes, however, that Kripke "doesn't say anything in support of this latter claim, and in any case it seems to me plainly false" (221). Briefly, I think that Kripke's concern is that, if a name's meaning is not its Fregean sense, then all that the name can contribute to an identity statement is the thing to which it refers, which will make that identity statement trivial (see Frege 209). If this is indeed Kripke's thought process, I agree with Searle that it is not a good argument. Just because a sense (intentional content) is not a name's meaning (in some sense of its being necessary) does not mean that the sense cannot be relevant to the cognitive value of identity statements. For example, given two names for the same thing, the names may be different only in that they reference the object via different causal chains, or one by causal chain and another in a different way. I don't wish to endorse this particular solution, but this is enough to distinguish them in cognitive value without their sense being their meaning.

"the author of the famous incompleteness proof" (Kripke 83–84). Thus, whenever Jones means to refer to Gödel, he, in fact, refers to Schmidt, for Schmidt is the one who uniquely satisfies the description, "the author of the famous incompleteness proof." Just as with tomatoes and apples above, it seems strange that one could refer to something entirely different than what she intends.

2. The Causal Theory of Reference

Kripke's picture of how reference works is that a reference to an object follows a chain of reference leading back to when the object was originally named (96). When an object is originally named, it is named either ostensibly or by description. Then, the name proliferates throughout the community of speakers with each acquisition of the name occurring as the new speaker intends to use the reference of the speaker from whom they learned the name (Kripke 96). When names change or are reused, it is really the introduction of a new name into the system (Kripke 96-97).

To see how this works we need only examine how children are named by their parents. The parents discuss and decide on a name for the child and cause that name to be written on his birth certificate. Other speakers turn to the parents to learn the child's name and begin to call him "Charles" because his parents do. These new speakers intend to use "Charles" to refer to that which Charles' parents refer to. Even Charles himself will learn his own name that way, and when he introduces himself, he is relying on and extending the chain leading back to the historical event when he was originally named. If I hear a friend mention Charles, I can immediately refer to Charles even without knowing anything about him. This seems obvious because the question, "who is Charles?" is meaningful even though it is an expression of ignorance of the sort of information that would constitute a definite description. Other names are the same. I refer to gold because I picked up the name from my community of speakers, not because I am intimately familiar with how the properties of gold differ from, for example, those of iron pyrite (which I am certainly not). A referential chain traces back from me through the speaker or group of speakers from whom I acquired the name to the original introduction of the substance's current name. In this way, my reference to gold does not go astray even if I am prone to inadequately or falsely describe it.

On the causal theory, I do not assign necessary properties to an object when I refer to it by name because there is no description associated with the name as its meaning. When I refer to Shakespeare I point through the historical chain at the man himself, no matter what we have discovered, or

will yet discover about him. Should we discover that Shakespeare had gone into woodworking and that his plays and his fame were only incidentally attributed to him, we should not be discovering a contradiction, nor would we then have to ask which man really was Shakespeare (although we would have to ask which person or persons really wrote the plays). Additionally, by referencing via a causal chain, our reference would never mistakenly go astray (even if we do not know very much about the object to which we refer), because we get at the thing directly, no matter what properties we may incorrectly ascribe to it. When I speak about Gödel, I refer to him no matter what I know or think I know about him.

3. Searle's Defense of Descriptivism

Searle defends descriptivism by arguing that Kripke's and other's attacks are grounded on a general perception that descriptions must be fully-formed linguistic descriptions. For Searle, the debate between the causal picture and the descriptivist theory is fundamentally a debate between whether the phenomenon of reference is public or private, external or internal (206).[4] His point seems to be that the criticisms of descriptivism are founded on its obvious inadequacy as a public system of reference when it is actually meant to include private elements. Searle believes that the descriptions in the descriptivist theory are, most fundamentally, conditions internal to a speaker which (when reference is successful) objects satisfy (206). While some internal conditions—what Searle calls intentional content—are expressible in words, they are not totally public, linguistic descriptions (Searle 206). Instead, descriptivism allows that a name refer to an object when that object satisfies the intentional content in the mind of language users (206). This intentional content is different than any definite linguistic description or group thereof.

We have already seen that Kripke includes intention in his account of reference. Each new speaker learns a word by intending to use it to refer as others. Searle argues that Kripke's picture of reference is only successful inasmuch as it is compatible with this type of descriptivism (214). He argues that Kripke's concept of an original naming is "entirely descriptivist"

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[4] I use "public" and "external" to describe something that is part of the observable world and therefore accessible to everyone. I use "private" and "internal" to describe something that is not simply observable and, therefore, one or more people cannot access it. In this sense, neuron activity would be public (although admittedly difficult to observe) and anger, if it is not reducible to either neuron activity or behavioristic terms, is private (even though we can approach it through observational methods).

in that it relies on a subject's intending a certain, heretofore unnamed thing when bestowing the name (Searle 207). Furthermore, Searle argues that parasitic references also work due to intentional content. A speaker's reference is only successful inasmuch as a transfer of intentional content is secured in the events that make up the causal chain of her reference (Searle 208, 214). It is due to this that I can successfully refer when I ask, "who is Charles?" I successfully refer to the one that I intend: the one that my friend just referred to. There is certainly a causal story to tell, but, Searle thinks, it is only because I intend to follow the causal chain in my reference that the causal story is relevant in this case (208).

Searle's response to Kripke's first objection is, as I mentioned before, the assertion that descriptivism is a theory of reference, not one of meaning (221). He concedes that descriptivism was originally presented by Frege as a theory of meaning, but he specifies that his own understanding of descriptivism is, as Kripke allowed that it might be, that it is only a theory of reference (Searle 220). Searle's response to Kripke's second criticism is far more interesting. He points out that, in the Gödel and Schmidt example, Jones (the ordinary speaker) probably knows quite a bit more about Gödel than that he authored the incompleteness proof. "At very least," Searle writes, "he has 'the man called "Gödel" in my linguistic community or at least by those from whom I got the name'" (218). It is incredibly difficult to imagine someone who associates only with Gödel that he authored the incompleteness proof. In fact, I suppose that if someone only knew this one thing about him, that he would be quite alright with someone telling him that when he used "Gödel" he was referring to a man called "Schmidt."[5]

4. Defending Intentionality

Searle argues for the priority of intention to the causal chain, but his arguments are, to my mind, lackluster. To briefly go over one, Searle presents the name "Madagascar," which originally referred to a part of mainland Africa (209). When Marco Polo used the name, he no doubt intended to use it in the same way as the man from whom he heard it (or as the larger community of speakers did), but he incidentally misused it, in that sense, to refer to an island off the African coast. Now we use

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[5]This circumstance is probably stranger than Kripke thought when he offered it as an example. To "only know" about Gödel that he authored the proof that arithmetic is incomplete, Jones cannot know that Gödel is called Gödel. Therefore, it is not a problem for Jones to find out that he is referring to a man that the linguistic community calls "Schmidt." "If that is the man who wrote the proof" this Jones would say, "then that is certainly the man to whom I refer with 'Gödel.'"

"Madagascar" in Marco Polo's sense, even though there is a traceable causal condition linking our use back to the name's original referent on the mainland. Searle argues that, while Kripke's view should tie our reference to a part of mainland Africa, we refer to the island off the coast because of the shift in intentional content that occurred with Marco Polo (209). Even though an omniscient observer of history could trace the causal chain back to when a portion of the mainland was named, Marco Polo modified the intentional content that was transferred by each historical link. Therefore, intentional content has priority over a historical chain for grounding reference.

The problem with this, and Searle's other arguments, is that this could just be a case of Marco Polo unknowingly introducing a new name, "Madagascar," which was merely influenced by an old name, "Madagascar."[6] A causal theorist could argue that, even though Marco Polo thought he was referring via a causal chain, he really introduced a new name into the community. Therefore, a single name did not shift meaning, rather, a new name was introduced. I will do my best to better defend the priority of intentional content over external causation in grounding reference below. In any case, my interpretation of Searle is that his theory is not a refutation of Kripke (for it certainly does not serve that purpose), but an appropriation of the strengths of the causal theory to the descriptivist view.

One may argue at this point that, as Searle's theory does not amount to a refutation of Kripke, my interpretation of Searle ought to be that he merely accepts Kripke's view without admitting it. Perhaps relying on the specific additional intentional content, "the man called 'Gödel' in my linguistic community," to account for parasitic reference is just to accept Kripke's picture of historical connection. I believe that Searle's theory is distinct from Kripke's theory both because it is more powerful (that is to say, it covers cases Kripke doesn't), and because I believe that intentionality can be shown to have priority over a causal chain in reference.

While it is true that names usually exist as shared with a larger linguistic community, possessing historical usefulness in most cases except for their initial introduction, this is not grounds for rejecting Searle's theory if it can explain these circumstances in its own terms. But, "as Kripke concedes, there may be names in the community that are introduced purely by description" (Searle 211). If some names reference objects introduced by ostension, and other names are introduced (or used) purely by description, then ceteris paribus a theory that covers both cases is stronger

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[6] I am indebted to Professor David Jensen who suggested this idea to me in a private conversation.

than a theory that only deals with one. Searle's approach is able to reduce the causal theory of reference to terms friendly both to the strengths of that theory and to those of descriptivism.

To see how, let us consider something that can have a description independent of linguistic community or history, such as a mathematical theorem. Let us suppose that I discover a theorem that states that the square of the length of a right triangle's hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the triangle's other sides. I decide to call this theorem "the Triangle theorem." If I explain the Triangle theorem to my friend (who is more experienced in mathematics than I), she may realize that the things I say are all true of the Pythagorean theorem. My friend may even tell me that what I really refer to is the Pythagorean theorem. In this case, where the intentional content I had about the theorem in question is almost entirely descriptive, I think my friend is right.

Due to this, I think it is quite possible that Searle is correct that our intuition that Jones is referring to Gödel, despite giving a description of Schmidt, is based on our implicit belief that Jones's intentional content includes more than this description (218). If Jones reads only the incompleteness proof on a page without any historical information or the name of the man who wrote it, and he rationally supposes that there is some author of the proof, he is already able to reference that person (whether Gödel or Schmidt). Jones may consider that person to be male or female, brilliant or boring—all by intending to do so. Jones may even consider counterfactual situations such as whether, if the one who wrote the proof had not lived, it still will have been discovered by the modern time. If Jones reads the Gödel's name in connection with the proof, or has a discussion with someone about him, he may come to adopt the name just as I will adopt the name of the Pythagorean theorem in the above example.

To return to Searle's point about priority of intentional content—even in historical cases—suppose that my naming the Triangle theorem in my previous example was externally caused without my knowledge (more precisely, if there was a historical transfer of the name without any intentional content). Suppose that I discover the unnamed version of the Pythagorean theorem while sitting in a classroom in the mathematics department. Outside the classroom is a large banner celebrating the discovery of a new theorem, the Triangle theorem which I, without my

explicitly recognizing it, use as my inspiration in naming the theory I discovered.[7] When I use "the Triangle theorem," I am certainly referring to the Pythagorean theorem and certainly not to the Triangle theorem (meaning the theorem to which my linguistic community refers with "the Triangle theorem").[8] Why is this? It is because, even though I received the name "the Triangle theorem" through traceable, external, historical causation, I did not receive it intentionally. When I learn later that my reference to the Triangle theorem is really to that which the linguistic community refers with "the Pythagorean theorem," I will probably switch the name I use for reference in response to traceable, external, historical causation. What is different after I learn the common name is that I receive some intentional content along with the mere symbol of the name. This is compatible with Searle's descriptivism, which does not hold that reference doesn't happen along historical chains, but that, when it does, it is by virtue of intentional content (218).

One may wonder, however, if this view is recognizably descriptivist. As I said above, Searle acknowledges his break with Frege's original theory, and it may stand that, in moving from linguistic descriptions to intentional contents, Searle's theory is no longer truly descriptivist. Even if that is the case, he has critiqued the causal theory of reference in a way that ties even parasitic reference to the intentions in the human mind. Even if Kripke's picture of reference is true, it manifestly only comes into play in cases of parasitic reference (which, plentiful as they may be, do not describe all reference). And parasitic reference, like all reference, requires, as its invocation, intention.

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[7] There have been very interesting cases where people claim to be able to influence creativity by placing suggestions in a person's environment which the person does not remember but which nonetheless influence them in some supposedly creative act. These cases are certainly not conclusive. However, it is not unusual to me (and I hope I am not alone in this) to realize, part-way through a train of thought, that a historically encountered external factor caused or influenced my thought to that point without my realizing. It is certainly plausible that similar cases occur only without one's ever realizing the influence.

[8] Another argument that could be made is that I fail to refer at all or simply misuse the name I have learned historically. It is clear from the counterfactual interaction with my friend that I refer to *something*, and it is very likely that, after the conversation, we would both identify it as the Pythagorean theorem. I also don't think that this circumstance will fall under simple misuse. It is because I do not think that the theorem I described is generally called "the Triangle theorem" that I am not simply misusing the name. If all I know about a thing could be stated in a description, then I would not be surprised to find that the thing has another name used by the larger community.

Works Cited

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