

- (1) First up today is looking a little bit closer at Kripke's modal argument against descriptivism. It will lead us to make a distinction which has come to be central for the debate on how singular terms refer.
- (2) But to do so we need to get clear about a notion which is much used within philosophy of language and philosophical logic, namely *possible worlds*.
 - (a) The basic idea is that our world could have been different than it is. Different initial conditions could have led to other outcomes and most people don't believe that every event is entirely causally determined.
 - (b) A possible world is a way that the world could have been but isn't. It is a complete description of a world-state. One way to think about them, then, is as a maximal state of affairs.
 - (c) Possible worlds are a useful tool for philosophers of language because they can be used to explain what counterfactual and modal claims mean. For example,

A statement P is *possible* if and only if there is a possible world where P is true.

A statement P is *necessary* if and only if P is true in every possible world.

- (d) Some theorists take the idea of possible worlds metaphysically seriously and imagines them as equally real to the actual world. But usually they're considered a useful tool for expressing the conceptual distinctions we want to make for modal sentences.
- (3) Moving back to Kripke, this lets us make an important distinction he uses to attack descriptivism: between rigid and non-rigid designators.
 - (a) A singular term is *rigid* if it has the same referent in all possible worlds where it has a referent.
 - (b) The name 'Niklas' is an example of a rigid designator. In all worlds where he exists the name refers to him and in those world where he has the misfortune not to exist, it doesn't refer at all.
 - (c) The idea is that when we use rigid terms to refer we use the actual world to identify the referent and then talk about that person or thing in whichever possible world we are concerned with. So, when we say that

It's possible that Niklas weren't a philosopher.

the name singles him out in the actual world, where he is a philosopher, and then says that there is some other possible world where *exactly he* is not.

- (d) Many singular terms are not rigid. Our familiar example of 'the present king of France' is not rigid. A possible world where a small *coup d'etat* happened would result in the term

gaining a referent. But there are currently three pretenders to the French throne, so the description would vary in reference between the possible worlds where each seized power.

- (4) (a) The core of the modal argument against descriptivism is that proper names are rigid designators. Their reference is the same in every possible world where the referent exists.
 - (b) But definite descriptions generally aren't rigid. Their reference varies between worlds depending on who or what satisfies the description in each particular world.
 - (c) Since descriptivism claims that proper names are interchangeable with definite descriptions it seems to have the consequence that names aren't rigid. But that contradicts our strong intuitions about how names function in counterfactual and modal contexts.
- (5) The troubles descriptivism has had with explaining this kind of language is what led to the development of its main competitor: *Direct Reference*.
- (a) The core idea is to turn back to the Millian thought that the only thing a proper name does is to stand for its bearer. They have no meaning apart from the person or thing it names.
 - (b) As such, names do not have senses and are not interchangeable with neither some particular description nor a cluster of them.
 - (c) Direct Reference understood in this way is a stronger claim than merely saying that proper names are rigid designators. Some definite descriptions, for example mathematical ones, seem rigid but do have descriptive content.

The positive square-root of 9

designates the number 3 in every possible world, but does so as a result of its descriptive content.

- (d) The literature is not always clear by exactly what is meant when discussing direct reference. Some theorists claim, as Lycan (2019) says, that Direct Reference is the strong Millian claim that proper names only designate a referent and completely lack meaning. That is the how we will use the term in this class because it is, in my experience, the more common way. But it is important to note that Direct Reference is sometimes taken to mean only the weaker thesis that names are rigid designators (for example, Kaplan, 1989).
- (6) But this is precisely the view of proper names which Frege reacted against.
- (a) If the only thing that the names 'Lewis Carroll' and 'Charles Dodgson' do is stand for their shared bearer, it seems difficult to explain why we have such different intuitions about the sentences,

Lewis Carroll is Lewis Carroll.

Lewis Carroll is Charles Dodgson.

- (b) For those who adopt the weaker thesis described above, there is still room for saying that proper names do have some sort of associated mode of presentation, but that the referent is not determined by satisfying that information or mode. In that case, Frege's solution to the problem still works.

- (c) If you take the stronger thesis one can instead, as Wettstein (2004) does, deny the idea that one has to know who or what a name refers to in order to understand a use of it. Without the demand for such a *cognitive fix* to understand, it's not strange that these sentences differ in informativeness. Only the latter provides us with more information about how to determine the reference of the name.
- (7) Non-transparent contexts is a more difficult problem for the proponents of direct reference.
- (a) Just like before, say that Max doesn't know that Lewis Carroll and Charles Dodgson are the same person. But when we substitute between two different names for a single thing we expect that the truth value of sentences doesn't change.

Max believes that Lewis Carroll is a good author.

Max believes that Charles Dodgson is a good author.

Proponents of direct reference thus need to explain how these sentence can differ in truth value even though the names have no more meaning than standing for their bearer.

- (b) But that is not the angle of attack they choose. Instead, they try to make palatable the unintuitive conclusion that these sentence do, in fact, have the same truth value, despite that Max is unaware that the names co-refer.
 - (c) The first step in this argument is a positive thesis: there is a *transparent* reading of these kinds of ascriptions of belief, which is true even when the person in question could not have expressed their belief in the way it's ascribed. Consider, for example, the sentence,

Columbus believed that Castro's island was China.

 Although Columbus certainly couldn't have used this designation for Cuba, and hence couldn't have recognised this ascription of his belief, the sentence still seems true.
 - (d) The more difficult step for this kind of solution is the negative thesis: that proper names are transparent in this way in all ascriptions of belief. This thesis lacks a standard argument, but the literature is ever growing.
- (8) Finally, we get to the issues about names which lack a referent. There are, essentially, two approaches taken here proponents of direct reference: *pretence theories* and *speaker-meaning*.

- (a) The idea behind pretence theories is that we understand fictional terms by pretending that they have a referent. Sometimes this pretence is conscious and sometimes it's implicit because we've made a mistake. The textbook (Lycan, 2019) considers these attempts and their corresponding issues in more detail.
- (b) The other option is to handle the issue in the same way that Kripke prefers to deal with referentially used definite descriptions. That is, a proponent of direct reference can claim that a sentence which contains a proper name which lacks a bearer actually lack semantic meaning. They are, strictly speaking, meaningless. But they can still be used by speakers to express something different from semantic meaning. It is their pragmatic *speaker-meaning* which we understand when these sentences are uttered.

(9) When we talked about Frege and descriptivism, I mentioned that the theory ascribes two distinct roles for the sense of a proper name.

- (a) The sense of a proper name is what it contributes to thoughts expressed by sentences which it occurs in. Loosely speaking, it is what meaning the name contributes to sentences.
- (b) The sense of a proper name is also what determines its reference. The referent of a proper name is simply the person or object which satisfies the descriptive content it expresses.

So, for a descriptivist we have the same answer — the sense of the name — to two different questions:

- What does a proper name contribute to the sentences it occurs in?
- What determines the reference of a proper name?

Direct reference, as we've discussed it so far, only provides an answer to the first of these questions. We have not yet considered what mechanism makes a proper name refer to a particular object.

(10) This leads us to the second major contribution made by Kripke and Donnellan, namely the *causal-historical theory*.

- (a) The idea here is that a proper name becomes attached to a particular person or thing by being assigned through what Kripke calls a *baptismal event*.
- (b) After that the name starts getting used and others can learn it from those who already know it. In this way we get a *causal chain of communication* which begins with the baptismal event and leads to our present uses of the name.
- (c) According to this theory, the reference of a proper name is determined by this causal chain of communication; the referent is simply whichever person or object which was baptised at the beginning of the chain.
- (d) In this way, the causal theory can explain how a proper name picks out the correct person even when the descriptive information we associate with it is incorrect, as in the Gödel-Schmidt case, or insufficient to uniquely determine a referent, as in the example with Marie Curie and Lise Meitner.

(11) But as with any philosophical theory it soon runs into some issues of its own. One of the major problems is presented by Gareth Evans (1973) tells us a story about the name 'Madagascar'.

- (a) As he describes it, the name 'Madagascar' originally designated part of the East African coast and not the major island it does today.
- (b) But through a series of misunderstandings and misuses the name came to be used for the island east of Africa instead.
- (c) Evans notes that if the causal-historical theory is correct, 'Madagascar' would still refer to the part of the coast which was originally named. That is what was pointed out as part of the baptismal event at the origin of the causal chain of communication.
- (d) I should note that this example has turned out not to be actually true. The book which Evans referred to had gotten the etymology of the name wrong.

- (12) One thing which distinguishes direct reference and the causal-historical theory from descriptivism is how they take language to relate to the external world.
- (a) Descriptivism thinks of reference as determined by the descriptive content expressed by a proper name. As such, it depends on the internal contents of the speaker's mind which reaches out and refers to whatever fits that content. As such, descriptivism is often understood to be a kind of *semantic internalism*.
 - (b) When the meaning of a proper name is instead exhausted by its reference, as direct reference claims, and that reference is in turn determined by causal relationships external to the speaker, the contents of our language depend crucially on external facts. Hence, we say that such theories are a kind of *semantic externalism*.
 - (c) This kind of approach is how Putnam (1973) explains that we have a *division of linguistic labour*, where experts fix the meaning and reference for the linguistic expression under their purview.
 - (d) Kaplan (1989) makes a similar distinction between *semantic subjectivism*, which sees the determination of meaning and reference as up to each individual speaker who then uses their conception to interpret others, and *semantic consumerism*, which sees meaning and reference as determined by experts and conventions within the linguistic community.
- (13) So, we have seen two main viewpoints for how singular terms work. Descriptivists, who see the reference of names as mediated by their descriptive content, and proponents of direct reference, who deny that there is any more meaning to names than standing for their referents. Both kinds of theories have their strengths and weaknesses.
- (a) Descriptivism easily solves the four initial puzzles since it maintains a strong distinction between the meaning or sense of a term and its reference. But the very idea that reference is determined by that content is what makes it difficult to give the right answer for modal and counterfactual statements.
 - (b) These modal questions are, on the other hand, easy to solve for direct reference. But as we've seen today, their solutions to the classical puzzles somewhat convoluted and unintuitive.
- (14) (a) Nowadays most theorists learn from both sides of the debate, but direct reference and a causal-historical approach are most popular.
- (b) It's important to note that one doesn't have to combine these two even if that is what is usually done. It is perfectly possible to claim that singular terms have some sort of descriptive meaning but that their reference is determined causally.
 - (c) There are also significantly more sophisticated versions of descriptivism, such as Internally Anchored Descriptivism, available than the ones we have discussed, which tackle the modal and indexical problems commonly used against them.
 - (d) Additionally, there has recently appeared a new version of direct reference which models the phenomenon as a kind of linguistically mediated extended perception. The idea is that through linguistic relations we can have even distant objects in mind in the same way that perception allows present objects to be. But these theories are unfortunately out of the scope for a first course in philosophy of language.