

## ARGUMENT IN FAVOUR OF DESCRIPTIVE THEORY OF NAMES

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### Resumen

Según las teorías de designación rígida y referencia directa los nombres refieren a sus referentes sin intermedio de sentido. Estas teorías han sustituido a las teorías de sentido que consideran los nombres como descriptivas. A pesar de algunos usos de nombres con determinantes y cuantificadores que no pueden explicar las teorías referencialistas, las teorías descriptivas no se consideran como alternativas de las teorías referencialistas. Sin embargo, existe un tipo de teorías descriptivas que considera el nombre como equivalente de una descripción metalingüística « el portador de N ». Los nombres pueden analizarse como predicados normales. Esa interpretación tiene apoyo gracias al uso de nombres con cuantificadores universales que pueden anteceder los nombres en varios idiomas.

**Palabras clave:** Designación rígida; Kripke; teorías de nombres metalingüísticas; fines

**Abstract:** According to theories of rigid designation and direct reference, proper names refer without intervening sense. These theories have replaced sense theories which consider names as descriptive. In spite of certain uses of names with determiners and quantifiers which cannot be explained by referentialist theories, descriptive theories are not considered as alternatives to referential theories. However, there is a type of descriptive theory which considers names as equivalent to a metalinguistic description "the bearer of N". Names can be analysed as normal predicates. This interpretation is backed by the fact that names can be used with universal quantifiers which can precede names in various languages.

**Key words:** Rigid designation, Kripke; metalinguistic name theories; Finnish

**Résumé:** Selon les théories de désignation rigide et référence directe, les noms propres réfèrent sans intermédiaire de sens. Ces théories ont remplacé les théories de sens qui considèrent les noms comme descriptifs. En dépit de certains usages de noms propres avec des déterminants et des quantificateurs qui ne peuvent pas être expliqués par les théories référentialistes, les théories descriptives ne sont pas considérées comme alternatives des théories référentialistes. Toutefois, il y a une version de théorie descriptive qui considère que les noms comme équivalents aux descriptions métalinguistiques "le porteur de N". Les noms peuvent être analysés comme des prédicats normaux. Cette interprétation est soutenue par la constatation que les noms peuvent être précédés par des quantificateurs universels dans différentes langues.

**Mots clés:** Désignation rigide; Kripke; théories de noms métalinguistiques; finnois

### Sumario

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## 0. Introduction

In this paper I try point out some short-comings in the *neoreferentialist theory of proper names*. Indeed, I argue that names are not to be given a referentialist semantic treatment, as some philosophers suggest. The fact that names are shared by several bearers has consequences as to their use in natural languages. Instead, names ought to be considered as predicates. This strategy helps us explain uses that defy referentialist explanations. We argue also that these uses are neither language specific nor marginal.

## 1. Setting the scene: names and reference

The so-called *new-theory of reference* has supposedly replaced the earlier *descriptivist* or *Fregean* view on proper names (and indexicals). There are (at east) three kinds of arguments supposed to falsify the Fregean paradigm which gives *sense* the role of *reference determination*. According to the descriptivist analysis of proper names and definite descriptions they belong to the same category. The referent (or the denotation) of a definite description “*The F*” is the only individual in the domain of quantification which is F. The predicate used in the description is essential in determining the correct referent and the uniqueness condition stems from the quantificational characteristics of the description.

Names and other directly referential terms are not supposed to behave in the same way. They are *rigid designators* by stipulation or *de jure*; they pick out the same referent in all possible worlds and they do it in a non-descriptive way. This does not mean that all rigid designators would be non-descriptive; an definite description like “*The square root of 4*” is rigid as its referent is the same in all possible worlds, but its sense determines the referent in each possible world. The referent just happens to be the same in all possible worlds. In general definite descriptions are flaccid or non-rigid.

There are arguments which supposedly prove that proper names are in fact rigid designators. First, according to the *modal argument*, ordinary proper names are considered to be *rigid designators* which refer to their bearer in all possible worlds and in all circumstances. Thus names also take wide scope in modal contexts:

- (1) Nixon might not have been the president of the US.

The *epistemic argument* says that for instance sentences of the form “*If N exists N is the F*” like

- (2) If Aristotle exists Aristotle is the teacher of Alexander the Great.

express an *a priori* truth if the description “*the F*” (“*the teacher of Alexander the Great*”) gives the sense of the name *N* (“*Aristotle*”). This is obviously not the case, so the description (or any other description) does not give the sense of the name because names do not have a descriptive sense. Names do not give any conditions the referent has to satisfy in order to qualify as the referent. Finally, the *semantic argument* says that the speaker need not have any qualities, *i.e.* descriptive criteria, at his disposal to identify the referent, and he can

still use a proper name successfully, which should not be the case if the descriptivist paradigm were true. Indeed, the descriptions a speaker might associate with the name could all apply to another referent, and the referent of the name would still be the original referent, not the one which actually has the qualities the speaker thinks the original referent has.

Names are thus supposed to be *directly referential* in the sense that they do not pick out their referent on basis of a quality the bearer has to satisfy to be the referent of the name, but because certain individual has been dubbed with a certain name. There is a *causal link* up to the original bearer which makes it possible for us to share the practice of referring to the same individual with the particular name. Moreover, some philosophers think that proper names introduce their referent into the proposition where they appear. This means that from truth conditional point of view, the individual itself is relevant, not any quality it might have, not even the quality of bearing a certain name. These features are not logically dependent on each other, but they are generally held by referentialist semanticists to various degrees. These features are not even the ones that concern us in this case. Rigidity, the epistemic and metaphysical arguments seem to be empirically true in many uses, as the new theories of reference predict. My interest lies in the trade-off between semantics and pragmatics in the reference of proper names.

Some philosophers (cf. Récanati 1993) consider proper names also as *type-referential* and that they have the semantic feature REF as part of their lexical meaning. This means that proper names as well as pronouns like "I" or "You" indicate that the proposition they serve to express is necessarily a *singular proposition* (or a proposition which has the referent as a part of it). The linguistic meaning of these pronouns is a *character* which picks out the referent in the context of utterance, for "I" approximately "*the utterer of this token of I*". The linguistic meaning plays no role in the truth-functional or propositional content of the utterance. Names are similar to these referential indexicals. The character of proper names is the definite description « *the bearer of N* » which singles out the referent of the name in the particular context. As REF is a lexical, i.e. invariable, feature of names, they cannot be used to express general descriptive propositions.

## 2. Descriptivist considerations

My intention is to draw attention to certain uses of proper names which simply defy any referentialist analysis, especially those which consider direct reference to be a semantic feature. Instead I suggest a descriptivist solution. There are some general alternatives to the new referentialist theories, among them the so-called *nominal description theories* which analyse the semantic content of the name in terms of a description « *the/a bearer of N* ».

Tyler Burge (1973) presented some early criticism of referential theories of names. According to Burge, names are normal predicates, and undetermined names have an underlying demonstrative as part of their semantic structure, which explains why names normally take large scope in modal contexts. However, just like other predicates, proper names can also be used with determiners and quantifiers in sentences like

- (3) An Alfred Russell joined the club today.
- (4) The Alfred who joined the club today was a baboon.
- (5) Some Alfreds are crazy; some are sane.

These sentences are quite commonplace and totally literal. So, names can take determiners and appear in plural even if there is some variation between languages. French for instance does not allow plural endings in names, but syntactically names are plural in sentences like

- (6) Deux Pierre sont arrives ce matin au bureau.

Burge linked these uses to normal unmodified uses of proper names using examples like the following

- (7) Jones is a Jones.

which is an “*obvious truth*” according to him. If names with determiners and quantifiers are normal nouns, we have to explain why names appearing on their own give the impression of being directly referential expressions. Burge’s arguments have not had much influence in the debate between referentialists and descriptivists, but I would like to point out some observations which strongly imply that names are semantically not rigid designators but normal predicates.

Stephen Boer (1975) criticised Burge’s conclusions. Sentences like (7) above do not express obvious truths, and the following example should be a contradiction

- (8) Pierre Romanov is not a Romanov.

However, there is a true reading of this sentence, which says that in spite of the fact that the person is the bearer of the name “*Romanov*”, he is not part of the Romanov dynasty. So, according to Boer, names are not predicates as Burge argues. Boer’s criticism is partly correct in that names are not unambiguous in their appropriateness criteria. There are practices concerning family names which are equally relevant as dubbing, but this is far from a conclusive argument against Burge. Moreover, Boer misses the point that first names behave as Burge suggests:

- (9) Anthony Blair is an Anthony.

The difference between first names and family names stems from the fact that names are generally not considered to be important features of their bearers. Nevertheless, bearing a certain family-name may (but does not have to) imply membership in a certain family. However, this fact is less central in the primary function of names which is simply naming. Family names are not even used in our sense in several communities, this is still the case in Iceland, just to mention one example, and even in other European communities family names are fairly recent. So, the paradigm case of naming is the use of first names rather than family names. In cases where these families are powerful dynasties, it is possible to say things like X above, but first names are not generally used in this way. But, if naming is sup-

posed to be a universal phenomenon, we should rather stick to first names than family names.

### 3. Generality argument and its falsification

Besides the particular case of family names, the most likely argument, let's call it the generality argument, against the relevance of Burge's examples is based on their relatively small frequency. These uses just are not so common in English. Moreover, Burge does not present any examples from other languages than English (Cohen 1980). So the phenomenon can be just a marginal feature of English and not exist in other languages. There are two kinds of counter-arguments too the generality argument. The first one deals with a thought experiment and the second one involves cross-linguistic evidence.

Bearing a certain name, especially a certain first name, and sharing the same name is not a very important fact, if we exclude family names from our considerations. Still, even first names can be used as predicates as in the cases Burge presented. Some of uses are limited to languages with an article system, and even if such languages are definitely not uncommon, this is not a universal feature. Moreover, the semantic role of the articles is still under discussion; it is not clear whether they should be considered on a par with other quantifiers or if they are more like referential elements or something between these two. If we look for a genuinely universal phenomenon, universal quantification is a good candidate

The argument of generality can be falsified with the following thought experiment. Samuel Butler's novel « *Erehwon* » (1872) is a social satire. It deals with an imaginary English-speaking society where illness is highly stigmatised. For our purposes, we can add another imaginary feature to Erehwon. Not only ill people are stigmatised but also people who happen to bear a certain first-name, say "*Peter*". You can imagine any number of reasons for this persecution, for instance some religiously transmitted message which tells that the persecution of these people is the duty of all decent people. In these circumstances phrases like

(10) All Peters should be severely punished.

(11) I shall never let a Peter get away with out showing him my opinion of Peters.

(12) My daughter may marry a Tom, a Dick or a Harry, but never a Peter.

are common-place because of the increased importance of bearing a certain first-name. As is the case of Erehwon, this society may continue to speak normal English without any changes in its semantic structure. As a matter of fact it could be any English-speaking community taken over by fanatic zealots, but it could equally well exist in any linguistic communities which has a system of first names, which means most likely all existing communities.

As Erehwon can exist in all communities using first-names, this political contingency has implications to all languages alike. Many Indo-European languages (and many other languages, too) have a system of articles. In French, for instance, names take predeterminers

in a similar way as in English (*cf.* Jonasson 1994; Gary –Prieur 1994), so the argument of generality loses some of its weight because of this observation (*pace* Cohen 1980). If we consider a non-Indo-European language without a system of articles, Finnish provides us with some examples. As there is nothing similar to English or French articles, base names take on the functions of names with predeterminers in examples above. However, even if we attenuate the conclusions we draw from this fact, there is still the fact that universal quantification is a good candidate for a linguistic universal, alongside with names. In Finnish it is quite natural to say

- (13) Kaikki Pekkoja pitäisi rangaista. (All Pekkas should be punished)

Moreover, in Finnish names take also quantifier phrases; as in

- (14) Tapasin kaksi Pekka.

These sentences are naturally not very common in Finnish the explanation being always the relatively minor importance of having a certain first-name, but again in a Finnish Erewhon-like political context these sentences would be quite common place.

If we consider the following two deductions with their Finnish translations we can see the similarity:

- (15) All tax dodgers should be punished  
The Mayor of my hometown is a tax-dodger  
The Mayor of my hometown should be punished
- (15') Kaikkia veronkiertäjiä pitää rangaista  
Kotikaupunkini pormestari on on veronkiertäjä  
Kotikaupunkini pormestari pitää rangaista
- (16) All Peters should be punished  
Peter Brown is a Peter  
Peter brown should be punished
- (16') Kaikkia Pekkoja pitää rangaista  
Pekka Hakkarainen on veronkiertäjä  
Pekka Hakkarainen pitää rangaista

The validity of the first argument is guaranteed by the form alone, and the reference of the last sentence is one of *speaker reference* rather than *semantic reference*, we can see the analogy between proper names and common nouns. Names seem to behave like normal common nouns and their referential use is definitely not a semantic fact, because if we think that the names in the reasonings above change grammatical category, it is hard to see the link between names as common nouns and names as directly referential terms. Moreover, Kent Bach (1987) has presented an alternative explanatory strategy which treats names as predicates and semantically equal to definite descriptions of the form “*the bearer of N*”. The illu-

sion of semantic reference in this perspective is treated in terms of speaker reference, just like the referential uses of other definite descriptions (*cf.* Neale 1990).

One referentialist strategy is to say that proper names in the uses discussed above change category from proper names to common nouns (*cf.* Perry 2001). This is not a very clever way out. If the reasoning pattern with common nouns is based on their normal use as predicates and their reference to individuals can be explained as speaker reference, the identical pattern of reasoning with proper names does not speak in favour of category change. It would be very difficult to explain how a common noun and a proper noun are related so as to explain the switch from universal assertions to the level of individuals. This would be a blatant violation of explanatory economy.

#### 4. Conclusions

In *Naming and Necessity* (1980) Kripke emphasises that he does not try to formulate a complete theory of proper names. He simply draws conclusions from the way we use proper names. Thus Kripke's strategy is up to a point empirical or inductive, but his discussion violates one very simple rule governing empirical generalisations: he ignores a large amount of relevant usage data which must be taken into account if we try to formulate a semantic theory of proper names, and his followers have done nothing to make their theories more exhaustive. Instead they have followed the same arbitrary delimitation on relevant criteria as Kripke and some have tried to draw *semantic* generalisations from them. All Kripke's data is such that in the context of his discussion, the name, typically "*Aristotle*" or "*Nixon*", is already invested with the speaker reference. This fact is a contextual fact of usage, which is given a semantic interpretation, which is an unwarranted move in spite of the empirical validity of rigidity in these uses. Semantics has to be abstraction from contextual phenomena like speaker reference, but if reference on basis of Kripke's corpus is considered to be a *semantic* feature, this usage feature is smuggled into semantics. Thus, this strategy falls prey to the same error, that of ignoring data that any layman would consider as relevant. With this I meant that anybody would agree that the sort of uses discussed below concern the grammatical category of proper names.

The fact that this discussion ignores is that proper names are not arbitrary chosen. Family names as well as first names are shared by other people. In the referentialist tradition, names are treated as individuals; one name per one bearer, so that Peters do not have the same name, a point of view amply ridiculed by Katz (2001). If each name is different, it makes no sense to say that two Peters have the same name, and it would be absurd to say that two people have different names, because names are individualised with respect to all bearers. The fact that names are indeed shared is ignored by referentialists who take an *ideal typical view* on naming; names are unique to their bearers as social security codes are, but this point of view blurs substantial facts about using names in human communities. If we are to take seriously the slogan of "meaning is use", we cannot arbitrarily leave out this fact, which favours a non-referentialist solution to the semantics of proper names.

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