Proper Names, Meaning and Context

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Abstract

From the apparently trivial problem of homonyms, I argue that proper names as they occur in natural languages cannot be characterised as strings of sounds or characters. This entails, first, that the proper names philosophers talk about are not physical entities, like strings, but abstractions that, second, may be better characterised as triples (s, m, C), where s is the string that conveys the meaning m in a set of contexts C. Third, the generality principle of compositionality may be put into question, for apparently its converse holds in some cases. Finally, the prominence of context for determining the meaning expressed by a sign suggests a strong connection between proper names and indexicals. This connection has been largely overlooked by the analytic tradition, in spite that both proper names and indexicals have

been among their hottest topics. This may be because the analytic literature about proper names has been decisively influenced by Frege's work, which was better suited for formal languages. Izydora Dąmbska and Jerzy Pelc, with their semiotic background, were able to have a finer understanding of this quasi-indexical character of proper names.

Proper names, i.e. linguistic entities such as "Fido", "Titanic", and "El Aleph" used for designating a unique object, have been the subject of several works and debates among philosophers and logicians — perhaps much more than among linguists. Theories of their semantic content and their metaphysical and epistemological ramifications in both natural and formal languages have been at heart of the debate of the analytic tradition in the past century.

The semantic content of the proper names occurring in natural language is still subject of controversy with no foreseeable agreement. The two main theories are the *direct reference theory* (Mill 1974; Putnam 1973; Kripke 1980) and *description theory* (Frege 1892; Russell 1905). The former proposes that proper names are rigid designators, in the sense that they denote the entities they name without the mediation of a description or connotation. In this framework, the meaning of a proper name, like "Hermann Hesse", is just Hermann Hesse, which is the person that this name denotes.

The description theory proposes instead that what we use as proper names in natural languages are actually definite descriptions in disguise. In Russell's formulation, the meaning of the name "Hermann Hesse" would be a description like "the author of *Der Steppenwolf*", which would ultimately refer to Herman Hesse himself. In Frege's formulation, the meaning of "Hermann

Hesse" may be characterised as a pair (d, r) where d is the former description, which is its connotation or sense (*Sinn*), and r is *Hermann Hesse* himself, which is the denotation or reference (*Bedeutung*) of "Hermann Hesse".

> The denotation of a proper name is the very object we designate by it; the idea we have of it is entirely subjective; in between lies the connotation, which, although it is no longer subjective like the idea, nor is it the object itself. (Frege 1892, p. 30)[1]

However, how do we know what entity is denoted by a given proper name? In formal languages, like the ones for expressing number theory, this is very straightforward: the name "0" designates the number 0 regardless of the context in which "0" is used. This means that every time we print "0" in such language we are denoting the number 0. For this reason, it is very usual to characterise proper names as *strings* of characters that denote a unique object.

The proper names we encounter in natural languages are quite different, though. The apparently trivial problem of homonyms makes a very compelling case against characterising them as strings. If proper names were strings, then any proper name "x" must refer to a unique entity x. This must also hold for "Francis Bacon", if it is a proper name. Nevertheless, at least two persons answer to that name: an English philosopher and an Irish painter. Hence, either "Francis Bacon" is not a proper name or proper names are not strings.

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[1] "Die Bedeutung eines Eigennamens ist der Gegenstand selbst, den wir damit bezeichnen; die Vorstellung, welche wir dabei haben, ist ganz subjektiv; dazwischen liegt der Sinn, der zwar nicht mehr subjektiv wie die Vorstellung, aber doch auch nicht der Gegenstand selbst ist."

The first disjunct may be dismissed on the grounds that, in natural language, any string can always be used to name a new entity. There are several dogs that answer to the name "Fido", several vessels named "Titanic", and perhaps several stories called "El Aleph". The second disjunct instead is compatible with something proposed by Saul Kripke himself, who says that:

> [...] we could speak of names as having a unique referent if we adopted a terminology, analogous to the practice of calling homonyms distinct "words", according to which uses of phonetically the same sounds to name distinct objects count as distinct names. (1980, pp. 7–8)

In this approach, the string "Francis Bacon" would not be used to denote neither the philosopher nor the painter; or at least not immediately so. There would be some conditions in which the string "Francis Bacon" will refer to the philosopher, and other conditions in which it will refer to painter. The consequences of this for the theory of proper names (of natural language) are at least twofold.

First, since we can no longer characterise proper names as strings, this means that the proper names philosophers of language talk about are not physical. Hence, our proper name corresponding to Francis Bacon, the philosopher, would be whatever abstraction we have for uniquely identifying Francis Bacon, the philosopher. Such abstraction will be activated whenever the string "Francis Bacon" appears in a context where it is used to talk about the philosopher. This proper name has in turn a meaning, which may be just the reference to the philosopher, or a pear of connotation and denotation.

This entails the second consequence, which is that a proper name n is better characterised as a triple $n = (s, m, C)$, where s is the string of sounds or characters whereby its meaning m is expressed in a set of contexts C; the meaning m may be further characterised by the aforementioned pair (d, r). The triple (s, m, C) results from adding C to the Saussurean pair signifier/signifiant. Accordingly, every name n has in C some descriptive content on the context in which s is used for expressing m instead of some other meaning. This, incidentally, goes against the direct reference theory, for which proper name does not bear any descriptive content whatsoever.

A third possible consequence is that the *principle of compositionality* may not hold for all expressions of natural languages. According to this principle, the meaning of a linguistic expression is a function of the meaning of its components. In fact, as it was suggested by Jerzy Pelc, the converse of this principle may hold at least in some cases (see 1971a, sec. 1). Consider the following sentences:

1. The writings of Francis Bacon are my favourites.

2. The paintings of Francis Bacon are my favourites.

It is evident that the Francis Bacon each sentence is about is not referred by the string "Francis Bacon" first, and then by the sentences. Quite the opposite, it is in the context of sentence (1) that we can *infer* that "Francis Bacon" refers to the philosopher, and the like for sentence (2).

However, I do not think we can derive from this that the principle of compositionality does not hold in general, let alone that its converse holds in these cases. First, in neither case do we need the full sentence for establishing

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what Francis Bacon are talking about, because the syntagms "the writings of Francis Bacon" and "the paintings of Francis Bacon" would suffice for this. Moreover, I do not agree that for the principle of compositionality to hold it is necessary that each component of a linguistic expression has a definite unambiguous meaning. After all, it is precisely the string "Francis Bacon" what, in the context of each sentences, makes it possible to refer to either the philosopher or the painter. We could not have performed the same trick with the string "Hermann Hesse".

However, it is quite possible that extra-linguistic context be necessary for completing the meaning of a linguistic expression, in which case it may be argued that the principle of compositionality does not hold in general. In fact, we can hardly speak of strings with fixed meanings independent of context, as far as natural languages are concerned. As we have just seen, this includes the strings that correspond to proper names, which are precisely the kind of signs that we most deliberately try to use in that way.

This is very much in agreement to what I call Pelc's *principle of contextuality*, according to which the scheme "the sign s expresses m" only makes sense as an ellipsis of "x uses the sign s for expressing the meaning m in a context c". With this scheme at hand we can more readily explain why s can also be used for expressing another meaning in a different context. In that respect, Pelc remarks:

> Pure sign-uses do not exist: not only because the inferential factor is included in each of them, but also because each of them has different admixtures, in addition to its obligatory inferential

component and this or that dominant one; for instance, a signaling dash can be noticed in a number of iconic uses; a symbolic touch, or both symbolic and iconic elements, in many signaling uses; etc. (1984, pp. 324–5)

If we take "sign" and "string" to be synonyms — *in the context of this paper* —, we can conclude from this quote that it is a context what makes it possible for us to *infer* what the utterer of sign/string meant by it (at such context). Given the appropriate contexts, I can refer to the philosopher Francis Bacon through the strings "Francis", "Bacon", and even "William Shakespeare".[2]

Concerning this last remark, we often use only first names for speaking about a person. The common friends of John Holmes and a John Smith will often use just "John" for talking about either of them. If they were just speaking about John Smith they will probably say that "John beat the other John at chess" rather than that "John Smith beat John Holmes at chess". Context makes it possible for the simplest strings to bear complex meanings and, as Izydora Dąmbska puts it,

[...] a proper name out of context is essentially indefinite as to its meaning. It is only linguistic or situational context that can impart a definite sense to a proper name. In this respect proper names resemble token-reflexive words, such as the personal pronouns ("I" , "you", etc.), whose meanings are in each case condi-

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[2]I am alluding to the largely rejected speculation that Francis Bacon was the author of the plays attributed to William Shakespeare.

tioned by the situational context in which a given word is used.

(1979, p. 134)

This suggests a possible fourth consequence which would be unthinkable in formal languages, but that makes some sense in natural languages. If an indexical is "a linguistic expression whose reference can shift from context to context" (Braun 2017), then perhaps proper names are indexicals since their reference can also shift with context. There are, nonetheless, at least three reasons for rejecting this possibility.

First, as Dąmbska argues, whereas the reference of the personal pronoun "I" changes according to the person using it, proper names can only refer to those persons that answer to that name (1979, p. 134). Second, unlike indexicals, a proper name "n" can be used in a sentence of the form "my name is n". In fact, this is the condition that characterises proper names in one of the ways Dąmbska defines them (see 1979, p. 137).

The third reason concerns a special relation that descriptions have with proper names, but not with indexicals. Although names and descriptions are often considered opposite linguistic categories, Pelc remarks that a name "always connotes [some] properties by which its bearer[s] can be recognised" (1971b, p. 104) — consider that "all Marias are women" (1971b, p. 103).

Furthermore, Pelc agrees with Russell in that proper names are often used as shorthands for descriptions. However, unlike the author of *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, Pelc considers it "impossible to draw a sharp line between proper names and descriptions" (1971b, p. 111). Consider, for example, that when I referred to Russell as the author of *An Inquiry into Meaning and*

Truth, my intention was not so much to talk about whoever is the author of that book, but just to point to Russell, "like a gesture or a 'pure' proper name does" (1971b, p. 112). In that regard, remarks that "'pure' proper names are often more context-dependent than are 'pure' descriptions" (1971b, p. 113).

Even with those differences, it still remains clear that proper names behave a lot like indexicals. To some extent it is kind of embarrassing that this has not been properly addressed by the analytic tradition; especially considering that both proper names and indexicals have been among their hottest topics in the last century. I am even surprised that no one has been bold enough to propose that proper names are indeed indexicals — audacity is not scarce among analytic philosophers, and this would have definitely not been such a big one.

There may be several reasons for this. The one that I find most appealing is that the philosophical discussion around proper names has been decisively influenced by Frege's attempt to develop a "formal language of pure though, modelled on that of arithmetic", which is the subtitle of his *Begriffsschrift*. In formal languages it is perfectly possible to identify proper names with strings of characters, and to say that those strings uniquely refer to a single (abstract) entity. Furthermore, notions like context, which are paramount to understand how signs work in natural language, are absolutely superfluous in the study of formal languages.[3]

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[3]Although this is not a reproach to Frege himself, it may be said in his defence that he understood that words do not have meanings outside the context of a larger linguistic expression since, according to him, it is only in a complete sentence that do "words actually have a meaning": "Man muss aber immer einen vollständigen Satz ins Auge fassen. Nur in ihm haben die Wörter eigentlich eine Bedeutung. [...] Es genügt, wenn der Satz als Ganzes einen Sinn hat; dadurch erhalten auch seine Theile ihren Inhalt." (1884, §60)

The theory of formal languages, and its corresponding theory of proper names, should be a special case of of the theory of natural languages, and the theory of proper names thereof, not its source. It is not surprising that it was scholars with a greater background in linguistics and semiotics, like Dąmbska and Pelc, who better understood of this quasi-indexical character of proper names.

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