

A Counterexample to Variabilism

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Abstract Recent literature contains influential arguments for variabilism, the view that we should understand proper names as analogues not of constants, but of variables. In particular, proper names are said to sometimes take semantic values that are not referential but purely general. I present a counterexample to this view.

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Sam Cumming argues in his influential 2008 for variabilism, the view that we should understand proper names as natural language analogues not of constants, but of variables. In particular, variabilism maintains that proper names can function as bound variables. Consider:

- (1) There is a gentleman in Hertfordshire by the name of ‘Ernest’. Ernest is engaged to two women. (Cumming, 2008:535)

According to Cumming, this is true if and only if:

- (2) $\exists xyz$ (gentleman $x \wedge$ in-Hertfordshire $x \wedge$ named-Ernest $x \wedge$ woman $y \wedge$ woman $z \wedge y \neq z \wedge$ engaged $xy \wedge$ engaged xz) (Cumming, 2008:536)

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These truth conditions, notice, are purely general. They do not refer to anybody in particular; they simply require the existence of *some* gentleman as described.

Cumming is drawing from an older tradition that maintains that names can have such purely general, bound-variable, non-referential semantic values. The tradition goes back at least to Tyler Burge in 1973:

Sometimes names lack designations. ... There are ... cases in which the demonstrative acts as a bound variable—as when we say, “Someone cast the first stone. Whoever he was, call him ‘Alfred’. (That) Alfred was a hypocrite.” (Burge, 1973:435–36)

The view can look particularly attractive for certain modal or attitude contexts:

Perhaps Mary has a son named ‘John’ and perhaps John is the thief.

Mary is under the illusion that she has a son named ‘John’ and she believes that John is the thief. (Geurts, 1999:205)¹

Finally, here is another example from Cumming himself:

18. A man, call him ‘Ernest’, was walking in the park at 3 pm today. Ernest sat down on this bench. ...

Some would argue that the use of ‘Ernest’ in the second sentence in (18) is referential, referring to the individual the speaker of (18) had in mind. However, it is possible that one who utters (18) has no-one in mind (consider [Sherlock] Holmes concluding (18) on the basis of statistical patterns of pedestrian traffic in the park). It is also plausible that (18) is true even if the speaker is wrong about the person they had in mind, so long as there was another man who acted in the manner described. On such an understanding of (18), the occurrence of ‘Ernest’

¹Earlier modal and temporal operator examples are given by Craig Roberts in her doctoral dissertation (1987; cf. Cumming, 2008:536–37).

is interpreted, not referentially, but as an existentially bound variable (Cumming, 2013).

There seems to be room for doubt whether such examples really have purely general truth conditions. What happens, for instance, if two persons walked into the park, but exactly one sat on the bench? Is the utterance then still true, as the existential truth conditions predict? I for one am sceptical. Cumming himself admits, in fact, that “our intuitions go back and forth” (2008:536).

Setting aside, however, these worries about the examples above, let us consider what appears to be a clear-cut counterexample:

(3) Every time a gentleman named ‘Ernest’ walks into a bar, Ernest tells a joke.

It seems quite impossible to read the name’s unquoted occurrence as if bound by the indefinite description. (Indeed, this is what makes the example funny.) This is particularly worrisome given Cumming’s explanation of how names get bound:

[T]he indefinite (plus naming construction) is an operator that *selectively shifts* the variable assignment of the context in the ‘*x*’ position. [‘*x*’ being the variable modelling the name at issue.] The discourse as a whole is true if and only if the part *to the right of* the indefinite (not just its scope) is true relative to some such shift (Cumming, 2008:542–43).

Why is this particularly worrisome? Because variabilists cannot simply amend the above at will. There is a very good reason why Cumming allows indefinites to bind any names that occur to their right, even when these names are not in the indefinites’ scopes. In examples such as (1), the names are anaphoric on indefinites that occur in sentences that precede them in the discourse. Those names are not in the scopes of their binders, but they are, nevertheless, to their right.

The problem, however, is that in (3) this kind of out-of-scope, left-to-right binding does not (and cannot) occur.

(As an interesting side note, if we replace the unquoted name with a pronoun we get a case of donkey anaphora:

(4) Every time a gentleman named 'Ernest' walks into a bar, he tells a joke.

Unlike (3), (4) is clearly acceptable. It is a virtue of Cumming's view that it would allow us – if we applied it to pronouns – to explain donkey anaphora without positing E-type pronouns or discourse referents.)

What can be done to rescue variabilism? I can imagine two approaches. First, variabilists could claim that our counterexample would actually allow the bound reading as far as semantics itself is concerned, but that the reading is blocked by some kind of catastrophic pragmatic failure. Perhaps similar, but less catastrophic pragmatic failures occur in in-between cases such as on page 2.

For instance, maybe names are used with a presupposition of uniqueness, a presupposition that clashes in (3) with the universal quantifier. This doesn't seem very likely though, because we can say:

(5) Every Henry was a Tudor.

(England had eight kings named 'Henry,' of whom only two belonged to the Tudor dynasty.) Albeit false, (5) is grammatical. The universal quantifier doesn't clash with the hypothesized presupposition of uniqueness.

Second, it also seems possible that variabilists could explain away (3) by modifying Binding Theory. Binding Theory is the branch of grammar that studies the syntactic constraints on the distribution (i. e., on the relative positions) of coreferential or co-indexed names, pronouns, descriptions, etc. In principle, we could uncover constraints of this sort that would enable us to explain away the counterexample (3).

The onus, however, is on variabilism to pursue one of these strategies, or a third one. Meanwhile a certain degree of scepticism seems justified.

References

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