

Reference and Ethnic-Group Terms

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The increasingly pluralistic character of modern societies has led to questions, not only about the proper use of ethnic-group terms, but also about the correct semantic analysis of them. Here I argue that ethnic-group terms are analogous to other rigid designators whose extension is fixed in the way suggested by a causal theory of reference. My view accommodates precisely those scenarios of communication involving ethnic-group terms that will be seen puzzling to Fregeans. At the same time, it undermines the plausibility of nihilism about those terms.

I

Linguistic expressions with controversial semantic properties are not a new problem for philosophy of language. As is well known, the increasingly complex character of the sciences has led to questions about the semantic properties of theoretical terms, and also of natural- and biological-kind terms. At the center of these controversies, however, are theories relevant to issues so far largely unexplored. In a similar though less familiar problem, the increasingly pluralistic character of modern societies is now leading to questions, not only about the proper use of ethnic-group words but also about the correct semantic account of them.¹ My chief concern here is to show how an influential theory of reference can be applied to resolve a disputed question about the semantic properties of terms for ethnic groups.

Contra Frege and popular parlance, I argue that words such as ‘Eskimo’, ‘Inuit’, and ‘African-American’ function primarily as general terms and only derivatively as names of peoples. Since ethnic-group terms (hereafter, *EGTs*) in fact share relevant semantic features with natural- and biological-kind terms (hereafter, *NBKTs*), a correct account of the latter could throw some light on the former. Of two major accounts of *NBKTs*, semantic descriptivism and the causal theory, only the causal theory could be plausible for *EGTs*. This conclusion depends on the proposed analogy with *NBKTs* and the Kripke-Putnam arguments for the directness of certain terms. Yet I show both that the analogy is compelling and that those arguments, never applied before to the largely ignored class of *EGTs*, strongly support the view that those terms are also direct.

II

The term 'Eskimo' (in vernacular, *eaters of raw meat*) was introduced by Algonkian Indians to refer disparagingly to their neighbors. Today the term refers to the people of a large traditional culture in the arctic regions of North America, Asia, and Greenland. Never accepted by some of them, there was an attempt in the late 1970s to replace it with 'Inuit', which caught on only among certain communities in Canada and Greenland.

This historical development is instructive in certain ways. Terms such as 'Eskimo' and 'Inuit' raise a challenge for us. What exactly is their extension? To answer this, we must first determine whether *EGTs* are names or predicates. If evidence from the role of such terms in linguistic utterances points to the latter, they are primarily *general terms*; but if it points to the former, they are primarily *singular terms*. Let's first consider the second option. That ordinary parlance takes them to be ethnic *names* provides no help here. But Frege's claim (1952a: 45) about the role of 'Turk' in

(1) The Turk besieged Vienna

does. He took this *EGT* to be a singular term (a name of a people), disanalogous to 'horse' as this occurs in

(2) The horse is a four-legged animal.

In his view, (1) expresses a proposition about an individual object, while (2) has the form of a universal generalization with two quantified predicates.

By no means, however, did Frege settle the matter here. There is no denying that (2) consists of universally quantified predicates, but what about the logical form of (1)? Consider

(3) The elephant crossed the Alps,

whose logical form appears parallel to that of (1). If so, each could be represented as expressing a relation ('besieging', 'crossing') between an existentially quantified general term ('Turk', 'elephant') and a singular term ('Vienna', 'the Alps'). Thus, an alternative to Frege's interpretation of the role of 'Turk' in (1) is to take it to be analogous to that of 'elephant' in (3), or 'wood-tick' in

(4) The wood-tick carries lyme disease.

If this is correct, then 'Turk', as it occurs in (1), is not a name at all but a general term.

Further evidence that *EGTs* function primarily as general terms can be seen from their standard grammatical classification in the same category with count nouns ('horse', 'lemon', 'elm') which, unlike other common nouns (mass terms such as 'water', 'sodium', and 'nicotine'), divide their reference. Another way in which *EGTs* differ from names concerns syntax: of the two, only *EGTs* can be genuinely predicated of individuals. We ordinarily do that by uttering sentences like

(5) Osman was a Turk.

On the other hand, proper names cannot be predicates. Although we may say

(6) Bill is a Casanova,

here 'Casanova' is surely a metaphor for the predicate 'is a womanizer'. And of course, sentences such as

(7) George Orwell is Eric Blair

raise no counterexample, since the 'is' here is that of identity.

So far, then, not only does a sound argument showing *EGTs* to be names seem unavailable, but all evidence points rather to their being general terms. In fact, further analogies with general terms and disanalogies with names are not difficult to find: *EGTs* (i) admit genuine singular/plural variations; (ii) may occur in generalizations with 'all', 'most', 'a few', and other quantifiers; (iii) can form nouns phrases preceded by 'that', 'these', 'the', and other determiners, and (iv) have adjectival forms.

Assuming that *EGTs* are *general terms*, what is their extension? If ethnic groups are sets of people, as in the case of other sets, there should be a property that secures membership of them. Compare the set of lemons: clearly, to belong to it, an object must instantiate the property of being a lemon. Now, what's the extension of the term 'lemon'? Here there are two options: either *the property of being a lemon*, or else, *the set of lemons* itself. The latter seems implausible, since in a counterfactual situation where there were fewer (or more) lemons, the cardinality of the putative referent set would be different from that of the set in the actual world. Sets of different cardinality cannot be the same set. It follows that, if the extension of 'lemon' is the set of lemons, then the term would change its extension in the counterfactual scenario we are now imagining – for, there, tokens of 'lemon' could not pick out a set that is the same as that falling under the extension of the term in the actual world. That the extension of 'lemon' would change in this way, however, is implausible. Therefore, it seems we are left with having

to say that the extension of 'lemon' is simply *being a lemon*, a property uniquely satisfied by all and only lemons.

Now the problem raised by any *EGT* appears to be chiefly that of finding a property that all and only the members of the referent group have in common. For the term, 'Eskimo', the best candidate is *having Eskimo ethnicity*, *being of Eskimo descent*, or simply, *being an Eskimo*. This need not depend on either genetics or race, but could instead be construed as a complex property grounded in deep-lying factors responsible for the distinguishing traits of the Eskimo. On my view, the ethnicity of a people supervenes on their history of relations among themselves, with others, and with the environment. The Eskimo, for example, despite their diversity, share an ethnicity which holds together characteristics distinguishing them from other Northern peoples. Constitutive of that ethnicity are at least the following factors: (1) their history of causal commerce with an especially severe environment, (2) their being descendants of indigenous peoples of the far north who encountered seagoing Norsemen in the 13th century, and (3) their having developed a semi-nomadic culture in the arctic regions of the world – with its own art, ways of life, and language (Eskimo, a major branch of the Eskimo-Aleut family). *Being an Eskimo*, then, is a complex property rooted in factors such as these, and there is now logical space for a causal account of the reference of the *EGT* whose extension is that property. Arguably, what grounds the extension of the term, 'Eskimo', is our deference to a referential usage that goes back to the Eskimo's interaction with the Algonkian Indians (whether or not the Eskimo people ever ate raw meat). In the case of 'Inuit', the account equally invokes deference and a historic chain, though this one goes back only to the introduction of the term by some members of the referent group themselves in the 1970s.

An account of this sort seems equally plausible for other *EGTs*. Consider the case of 'Hispanic' as used by US speakers to talk about Latin Americans, Spaniards, Portuguese, and their descendants abroad. Well known demographic facts suggest that there is *no* superficial feature common to all these peoples. If we focus chiefly on their diverse racial backgrounds, cultural practices, and social preferences, that is what we should expect to find. Although some Hispanics have European ancestry (which may or may not be Spanish), others are of Amerindian, African, Middle Eastern or East Asian descent. Some speak European languages, mainly but not uniquely, Spanish, Portuguese and English; others, Amerindian ones such as Quechua and Guaraní. Some have dark skin, others light; some listen to classical music, others to salsa, tango or *chamamé*. Clearly, they are a very diverse group. Yet since all subgroups of Hispanics have been fundamentally related in some periods of history, we might plausibly take their ethnicity to consist in a common heritage – a past marked, for example, by the development of certain Amerindian civilizations, their fateful encounter with Europeans in 1492, the

physical destruction of native cultures and people, Iberian colonialism, the 19th-century wars of independence, and foreign (especially North-American) economic and political interference, including occasional military intervention. That individuals identified as Hispanics do share a heritage marked in this way, whether or not those individuals themselves have explicit knowledge of the historical experiences of their group, is the clue to a causal account of the extension of 'Hispanic', as ordinarily used in the USA.

The intuition here can be supported by a 'Twin-Earth' thought experiment. Imagine a subcontinent qualitatively identical to Latin America, in a planet qualitatively identical to ours. Twin Latin America is inhabited by people whose superficial features are indistinguishable from those whom we call 'Hispanics', even though the historical experiences of the former differ radically from those of the latter. The Aztecs, Mayans, and Incas never existed in Twin Latin America, nor did the Spaniards and Portuguese ever conquer it. Suppose, however, that some other group did: the Chinese, who ruled for three centuries, imposing Confucianism instead of Scholasticism. Now if we were to use an *EGT* to talk about the inhabitants of Twin Latin America, what would we call them? Were we to answer (as I think we should) that it is *not* possible, in the metaphysical sense, that those peoples should be Hispanics, this intuition would support the view that the ethnicity of Hispanics depends in part on their history of interactions within the group and with others.

A causal account of the terms US speakers use to talk about Hispanics could now be developed. Prominent among its metaphysical assumptions would be the claim that, for every possible world and for every person in a possible world, a person is Hispanic if and only if she is a member of an ethnic group individuated by the same factors that individuate the group of Hispanics in the actual world.

III

The details of a causal account of *EGTs* must, of course, be worked out. To begin with, it must settle the question, What are the defining marks of a term that qualifies as an *EGT*? An adequate answer to this would show how these terms differ from other general terms for groups of people. Furthermore, before we can safely endorse a causal theory of *EGTs*, we need to consider semantic descriptivism, a major rival account of their reference. Let's take up each of these in turn.

Given that *EGTs* are primarily general terms, what, if anything, makes them a distinct class within that category? That is, what conditions must a term meet to qualify as an *EGT*? In my view, a term qualifies if and only if there is a convention among members of a speech community to use that term

to pick out the property of belonging to a certain ethnic group. This definition accommodates a number of salient facts about *EGTs*. For one thing, a great variety of terms seem eligible for the class. Surely, 'African-American', 'Asian-American' and 'Chicano' belong to it. But so do 'WASP' and 'Anglo-American', as well as 'Azande' and 'Maya'. In other words, the class includes not only terms for ethnic minorities living in larger societies, but also terms for the ethnic majorities within culturally diverse societies *and* for the indigenous peoples of traditional societies. As defined here, the terms for ethnic groups devised by bureaucrats, journalists, and all non-experts would count as *EGTs* – in exactly the same way as the terms for ethnic groups proposed by ethno-biologists, cultural anthropologists, and sociologists. At the same time, the definition entails that not all terms for groups of people are genuine *EGTs*. 'Lilliputian', 'Atlantian', and 'Hobbit' obviously aren't, since each fails to pick out a property of the required type.

But, most important, the definition demarcates *EGTs* from any group terms that pick out properties individuated by factors other than ethnicity. These may include nationality, race, religion, and geographical origin. Note, however, that nationality terms as well as racial-, religious-, and regional-group terms may be used *in certain contexts* as *EGTs*. For example, it is not uncommon for 'Black', a primarily racial-group term, to occur *in lieu* of the *EGT* 'African-American'. And 'Irish', a primarily nationality term, may be used as an *EGT*, for instance, by the American-born person who identifies herself as Irish on St Patrick's Day. Similarly, although a Jew is someone whose religion is Judaism, and a Muslim someone whose religion is Islam, the terms 'Jew' and 'Muslim' can function as *EGTs* – for instance, when someone indifferent to religion identifies himself as a Jew (meaning, of Jewish parentage or ancestry), or when Brigitte Bardot complains about the number of Muslims in France (meaning, people of Arab descent).²

Furthermore, standard relations among *EGTs* raise no problem for the above definition, which is consistent with the existence of inclusive relationships among ethnicities, such as Bedouin/Arab; Tejano/Chicano/Hispanic, Caribou Eskimo/Eskimo, and so on. The definition is also consistent with there being degrees of ethnicity – as illustrated by individuals of mixed ancestry. In addition, it is compatible with *EGTs* having vague boundaries – of course, not exclusively a phenomenon of these general terms (May we call polluted H₂O 'water'? Coffee mugs 'cups'? Fetuses 'unborn babies'? Socrates' death 'suicide'?).

Finally, the definition offered here is neutral between ethnic-group categories' being 'out there' to be discovered or constructed by us. But the causal account outlined above is not.³ For, relevant to that account is the fact that the Eskimo (or the Hispanics) are an ethnic group with a certain history of causal interactions. Groups thus individuated are not invented but discovered by empirical means. Here, there is no denying that labels for putative ethnic

groups may be vacuous, or that some such labels are introduced for the purpose of individual or social control. For the former, the account holds that such terms are not genuine *EGTs*; for the latter, that, if a certain *EGT* is genuine and lacks disparaging connotations, the term is indispensable to language (without doubt, speakers do sometimes need to talk about ethnic groups).⁴ The causal theory survives all these criticisms, but as an account of the reference of *EGTs*, it has a major rival, semantic descriptivism, to which we now turn.

IV

Among the theses of semantic descriptivism (hereafter, simply ‘descriptivism’), two are relevant to the topic of concern here:

- (i) Sense determines reference.
- (ii) Linguistic communication requires entertaining at least one sense in common.

Thus construed, descriptivism is a theory broadly rooted in the work of Frege. Its thesis (i) rests on a Fregean strategy to solve a familiar puzzle facing statements of identity, that of cognitive value, by allowing that terms with different senses may nonetheless have the same reference. Essential to descriptivism is the notion that for any significant expression of a public language, we may draw a *sense/reference* distinction, together with the view that sameness of sense necessitates sameness of reference. For descriptivists, there is (as the supervenience slogan has it) no difference in reference without a difference in sense – though there could be difference in the latter without a difference in the former, as shown in their solution to the puzzle. Note, however, that here *sense* is a technical notion that cannot be cashed out as *whatever solves the puzzle*, since that would amount to restating it, instead of solving it. What, then, is *sense*? On this theory, for each significant linguistic expression, the sense is an entirely non-demonstrative mode of presentation, conception, or way of thinking about the reference. To distinguish this term of art from other technical and ordinary notions, let’s call it ‘descriptivist sense’. On a standard construal of Fregean semantics, senses of this sort determine the reference of linguistic expressions in actual scenarios, and also in counterfactual ones.

Note that, given this theory, not only is the reference of linguistic utterances dependent on descriptivist senses but so also is any successful understanding of them. According to a reading of Frege made popular by Carnap, among others, linguistic understanding requires the speakers’ grasp of descriptivist senses – these being propositions (or ‘thoughts’) and their

constituents, singular and general terms (or ‘concepts’). This theory, together with the Fregean doctrine of indirect reference, entails (ii) above. Assuming descriptivist senses, indirect reference (a familiar doctrine devised to accommodate the opacity of expressions in oblique contexts) has the following consequence: First, it goes without saying that, to communicate successfully by linguistic utterances, speakers must know what they are talking about – i.e., they must understand what their utterances refer to. This in turn requires their ability to interpret what is said in any given exchange. To do that, however, speakers must have the ability to construe indirect reports, which are needed for successful ascriptions of semantic properties to their utterances. Suppose Kripke tells Russell

(8) Aristotle was fond of dogs.

To understand what Kripke said, Russell must have the ability to report

(9) Kripke said that Aristotle was fond of dogs.

But such reports create oblique contexts, and the doctrine of indirect reference sanctions that, in any such context, significant linguistic expressions refer to their ‘customary senses’. If so, then any singular or general term embedded in the that-clause of an indirect linguistic report would refer to a concept (the term’s customary sense), and the reference of the embedded sentence would be the proposition that constitutes its sense in *non-oblique* contexts. Clearly, any two participants of a successful linguistic exchange must ascribe semantic properties (content and reference) to each other’s utterances. Imagine, further, that in the linguistic exchange above described, Russell and Kripke fail to coincide on even one sense that they both associate with declarative sentence (8). One of them may construe the expressed proposition as

(10) The teacher of Alexander was fond of dogs,

while the other construes it as

(11) The philosopher from Stagira was fond of dogs.

Since propositions are the customary senses of embedded sentences in indirect linguistic reports of content and reference, these speakers could not ascribe the same semantic properties to utterance (8). To begin with, the reference of their indirect reports of what has been said would be different. For one, it would be *that the teacher of Alexander was fond of dogs*, and for the other, *that the philosopher from Stagira was fond of dogs*. Clearly, given

the doctrine of indirect reference, the reference of the speakers' ascriptions would in those circumstances be different propositions. Communication by means of that utterance is therefore impossible, for in that case neither would know what the other is talking about.

Could descriptivists accommodate this case as one where variations of sense are nothing more than the speakers' 'coloring' of a public language expression? I think not, since the doctrine of indirect reference blocks this move – in exactly the same way as it blocks the descriptivist 'cluster of senses' strategy. Frege himself granted that participants of a linguistic exchange who fail to grasp at least one sense in common of a significant utterance could not successfully communicate with each other. In his example, two men, Herbert Garner and Leo Peter, know a certain Dr Gustav Lauben under different senses. '[A]s far as the proper name "Dr. Gustav Lauben" is concerned', writes Frege, 'Herbert Garner and Leo Peter *do not speak the same language*, since, although they do in fact refer to the same man with this name, they do not know that they do so. Therefore Herbert Garner *does not associate the same thought with the sentence* "Dr. Gustav Lauben has been wounded" as Leo Peter wants to express with it' (1956, p. 25, emphasis mine).

We may now safely assume that 'descriptivism' is an actual view, represented by traditional theorists under a familiar construal of Fregean semantics. What, then, would descriptivists say about the semantic properties of *EGTs*? Note, first, that general terms such as 'bachelor', 'puppy', and 'sister' generate no problem for them. In the case of the last, they may take its sense to be *female sibling*, a concept grasped by speakers, and its reference, *being a sister*, a certain property picked out by that term. For 'teacher', 'hunter', 'baker', 'baseball player', and so on, descriptivists may construe their senses again as concepts grasped by speakers (*one who teaches, hunts, bakes, plays baseball*, etc.) that denote corresponding properties (*being a teacher, being a hunter*, etc.). But problems arise with other general terms – for example, *NBKTs* such as 'water', 'elm', and 'tiger'. Consider 'tiger': descriptivists would say that its non-demonstrative sense is a concept grasped by competent speakers that determines, as the term's extension, the property of *being a tiger*. It is now notorious, however, that it is impossible to spell out a descriptivist sense that would pick out a property true of all and only tigers.⁵

V

A similar difficulty may be seen to arise for descriptivism about *EGTs*. On that account, for example, 'African American' picks out the property of *being*

African American. But is it possible to spell out a descriptivist sense that would pick out a property true of all and only African Americans? Speakers' conceptions of that property can vary greatly, as may be seen from the various criteria they might invoke to explain the meaning of the term. Were this to be tested empirically, one would find some speakers appealing to race, others to cultural heritage, national origins, historical background, and so on – a result that would not be surprising considering the great variety of descriptive and evaluative contents that speakers associate with that *EGT*. The evidence of ordinary linguistic practices, however, suggests that disagreement in the speakers' conceptions of denoted properties does not undermine successful communication by means of terms of this sort.

Furthermore, not only do ways of thinking about the properties expressed by *EGTs* sometimes vary widely from one person to another, but some such ways often rest on notorious misconceptions or incomplete understanding of the terms. Someone might, for example, regularly succeed in using 'African American' with its customary denotation even when she thinks that an individual is African American just in case he has both African *and* American cultural backgrounds. In this case, if the extension of the term is determined by its descriptivist sense, then in her way of thinking about the expressed property, any white South African who has lived in the USA long enough to assimilate fundamental features of American culture might fall under the term's extension. Yet this is squarely at odds with our common intuition: clearly, no such person would qualify as African American (a fact the speaker herself might acknowledge when presented with this counterexample). On the other hand, if she were to add *having dark skin* to her conception of the property picked out by her tokens of 'African American', then on descriptivist assumptions some individuals who actually qualify as African Americans would be left out of the extension of that term – viz., those who identify themselves as African Americans although Black ancestors are remote enough in their heritage to leave no trace of dark skin. But this result is not surprising: after all, those who identify themselves as African Americans make up a diverse ethnic group. Some listen to Mozart, others to hip hop or John Coltrane; some have dark skin, others light and so on.

Since many different criteria might influence someone's way of thinking about the property of *being African American*, it is possible that there is no one single conception of that property that (a) is shared by some speakers and (b) might serve as the descriptivist sense capable of securing success in their communication involving the term 'African American'. Like Frege, descriptivists are left with the conclusion that, as far as this *EGT* is concerned, such speakers *do not speak the same language*. But we may invoke hypothetical (and even actual) scenarios showing that those who have no shared sense of an *EGT* may nonetheless succeed in linguistic communication involving that term.

A related problem can be illustrated with the case of 'Hispanics' and 'Latinos'. What, if anything, could serve as their descriptivist senses? Consider, respectively:

- (A) Being people related in some fundamental ways to Hispania, a former Roman territory in what is now Spain and Portugal.
- (B) Being people related in some fundamental ways to Latin countries.

(A) would clearly fail to determine a property that could be truly predicated of all and only those who fall under the extension of 'Hispanics', since it leaves out the Latin American Indians, as well as several generations of other Latin Americans who have no fundamental relation with Hispania. (Note that, when the term is used, for example, by speakers in the US, the associated way of thinking is often *precisely* that of having some Amerindian background.) And when (A) is taken to be the descriptivist sense of the term, it determines a property that may be truly predicated of Filipinos, who clearly are not eligible to fall under the ordinary extension of this *EGT*.

On the other hand, if we assume that descriptivism is correct, then 'Latino', the *EGT* preferred by some members of the Hispanic community in the USA, is no better off. When its descriptivist sense is construed as in (B), couldn't the term be truly predicated of Romanians, Italians and the French? Similarly, when the descriptivist sense of 'Latino' is construed as in (B), it will then pick out a property also satisfied by the peoples of the French colonies in America and their descendants while failing again to be satisfied by the indigenous peoples and other Latin Americans of non-Latin origins such as Alberto Fujimori, Carlos Menem, and Bernardo O'Higgins.

The argument here is:

- (1) Whenever an ethnic group includes peoples who are significantly diverse in their superficial traits (race, education, social preferences, etc.), communication by an *EGT* for such a group may succeed, even though it involves no shared conception of the property picked out by that term.
- (2) In many cases, ethnic groups include peoples who are significantly diverse in their superficial traits.

Therefore,

- (3) In many cases, communication by an *EGT* for a diverse ethnic group may succeed, even though it involves no shared conception of the property picked out by that term.

(4) But given descriptivism about *EGTs*, communication by an *EGT* cannot succeed if it involves no shared conception of the property picked out by that term.

(5) (3) and (4) are incompatible.

Therefore,

(6) Descriptivism about *EGTs* is false.

This argument, if sound, counts as a *reductio* of descriptivism about *EGTs*. But is it sound? To support (1) and (2), we may invoke terms for ethnic groups of diverse character ('African Americans', 'Hispanics', and the like) to show by thought experiment that it is possible that some speakers' conceptions of the property of belonging to any of these vary widely. (3) follows deductively from (1) and (2). (4) is an instance of the general descriptivist thesis (ii) above, according to which, for communication involving any singular or general term to succeed, speakers must share at least one conception of the reference of the term.⁶ (5) is obviously true, and (6) is the resolution of the tension between (3) and (4), one of which has to go. Because (3) rests on strong evidence of successful communication even in cases where speakers lack a shared conception of the property expressed by their tokens of *EGTs*, it follows that (4) must be abandoned. Since the argument is plainly valid and its premises well supported, its soundness then is equally beyond dispute.⁷

VI

Another reason against descriptivism about *EGTs* invokes familiar cases where, because of misconceptions, the speakers' ways of thinking about the property expressed by an *EGT* are sometimes altogether false of the intended group, yet true of *another group*. In any such scenario, it would be implausible to conclude that their tokens pick out the property of belonging to the other ethnic group. In fact, errors of this sort are not uncommon within the broader category of group terms. Consider a case involving the 500th anniversary of Columbus' first voyage to the New World. The event was celebrated in Spain with slogans suggesting that many there persist in believing that members of their own national group were the first Europeans to reach America by sea. If it is a term's descriptivist sense that determines its extension, here it would then be the Norsemen rather than the Spaniards who fell within the extension of such speakers' tokens of the nationality term 'Spaniards'. Yet no matter how mistaken those speakers were, we would not

interpret their utterances as having failed to be about the Spaniards. At this point, however, the descriptivist may object that referential success in this case surely rested on the availability to speakers of more than one way of thinking about the denoted property. Even when error may affect certain ways of thinking about the property denoted by an *EGT*, competent speakers could still succeed in using it with its standard reference provided that at least some true ways of thinking about that property are available to them. Those ways of thinking could after all amount to necessary and sufficient conditions for someone to fall within the extension of the *EGT*.

But this appeal to a cluster or family of descriptivist senses cannot succeed.⁸ For imagine a remote community of historically ignorant speakers who have had contact with Anglo-Saxons in the past, think of them as being the first Westerners to journey to India by sea, and currently have no other conception of them. Those speakers would of course be in error, since their conception of the property expressed by their tokens of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ is true, not of the Anglo-Saxons, but rather of some Hispanics (the Portuguese). Yet if the extension of any *EGT* is determined by the *speaker’s non-demonstrative conception* of the denoted property, then in the community we are now imagining, it would actually be the Portuguese who fell under extension of their tokens of ‘Anglo-Saxon’. But given the past causal interaction of members of that community with the Anglo-Saxons when their term for them was introduced, that construal of the thought experiment appears counter-intuitive – just as it would be to say of our tokens of ‘Gödel’ that they refer to *Schmidt, the real discoverer of the incompleteness of arithmetic* in Kripke’s (1972) thought experiment. Our conclusion here rests, of course, on intuitions about what we would say in the imagined scenario, and, as often happens with such modal intuitions, these too might be open to challenge. Yet given that, *ex hypothesi*, speakers have had causal contact *Anglo-Saxons*, there is a strong presumption that their tokens of the term introduced to talk about them picks out the property of being an Anglo-Saxon.

The above arguments, together with evidence suggesting that misconceptions and errors about the properties denoted by *EGTs* often have no bearing at all on effective communication by means of them, undermine descriptivism about such terms. On the other hand, success in communication under any of the described circumstances would be completely unremarkable if the extension of *EGTs* were fixed *directly*, in the weak sense of ‘direct reference’ presupposed by a causal theory. On this account, *EGTs* have associated contents that often play a role in the grounding of their extension. For example, some Spaniards exploring South America in the 16th century dubbed the Tehuelches of southern Argentina ‘Patagones’ (in vernacular, ‘people with giant feet’) after discovering their oversize footprints, and this conception of them seems to have contributed, at the outset, to securing the extension of that term. But once that extension was secured, the link took hold

in the linguistic community, so that even after this conception of the Tehuelches was later discredited, the referential link nonetheless remained. 'Patagones' is still used to denote some native peoples of Argentina who, as far as anyone can tell, have average-size feet (what the Spaniards saw were actually footprints of feet wrapped in fur). Cases of this sort can be accommodated easily if the extension of *EGTs*, like that of *NBKTs*, is taken to be secured in a dubbing transaction by means of ostensions sometimes accompanied by a certain conception of the referent. This account succeeds precisely because the referential links thus established do not depend at all on the *accuracy* of that conception. That some *EGTs* may catch on in a linguistic community even when the conceptions speakers associate with the expressed properties are inaccurate or seriously mistaken is, after all, a phenomenon familiar in the case of *NBKTs*.

Compare communication involving misconception about the properties picked out by tokens of those terms. Familiar thought experiments show that, independent of the speakers' conceptions of the properties denoted by their tokens of *NBKTs*, in any possible world where those terms could be used to pick out the property of belonging to a certain kind or species at all, they would denote the property of *being of exactly the same substance/species denoted by tokens of the terms in the actual world*.⁹ Yet in contrast with demonstratives, often thought to be *purely* referential, *NBKTs* appear to be among the terms that have meanings, construed as 'dossiers', 'stereotypes',¹⁰ or simply, descriptions associated with such terms by competent speakers. If the causal theory is right, however, such meanings would not only fall short of determining the extension of those terms, but also be irrelevant to the grounding of their extension. For this type of term, referential links to certain substances and species are first established by the speakers' causal commerce with samples of those substances and species, and later transmitted to others through social interaction, with no further direct causal contact needed.¹¹ If it is causal contact with essential properties of substances and species that initiates the actual practices of using *NBKTs* with certain extension, their extension is fixed in a manner entirely independent of whether those who begin using those terms have accurate conceptions of the properties picked out by their tokens.

A view taking *EGTs* to be direct (in much the same way *NBKTs* are) can offer a similar account of the grounding of their extension. That account would be in a position to accommodate precisely those cases of communication involving misconceptions that were only mystifying to descriptivists. On the causal account, such phenomena would turn out to be quite unremarkable, as they are in the case of *NBKTs*. If the analogy of *EGTs* with *NBKTs* is plausible, we may agree that misconceptions about the properties picked out by the former, often due to ethnocentric prejudice, are not uncommon. At the same time, there is room to insist that *that* need not

undermine communication involving *EGTs*. Clearly, referential success and communication by means of those terms ceases to be puzzling when their descriptivist senses are not taken to determine their extension. Instead, the extension of *EGTs* can be seen to be grounded in the speakers' interaction with members of the ethnic groups themselves. This view is, of course, familiar from the causal account of *NBKTs*. I submit that, as with these, so in the case of *EGTs* as well, the descriptivists' failure to account for the scenarios imagined here supports the hypothesis that these terms' extension is fixed in the way suggested by a causal account.

One difficulty with my proposal, however, is that speakers seem to have *no* causal contact with anything 'essential' to all and only the members of an ethnic group. For, such groups often include very diverse peoples. If so, then no analogy with *NBKTs* could succeed, and the view proposed here would be as puzzling as descriptivism. But I have argued that members of ethnic groups share a complex property supervenient on the history of relations within their group, with others, and the environment. Recall 'Eskimo': it is with a property of just this sort, rooted in deep-lying factors responsible for the distinguishing traits of the Eskimo, that the Algonkian Indians had causal contact when the term was introduced. Deference to a referential usage going back to their interaction with those people (whose eating habits they disdained) did the rest.

In my view, nothing stands in the way of developing that causal theory of *EGTs*. Although such a theory must claim that causal commerce with members of an ethnic group is necessary at the outset for establishing the denotational link of a certain term, it could also allow for changes in its extension, which may happen over time or with contextual variations. A causal account of the extension of the terms introduced to talk about ethnic groups would raise no puzzle, simply because the properties constitutive of group identity, which are necessary to get that theory off the ground, do seem available.

Yet couldn't those properties serve as the descriptivist senses that determine the extension of *EGTs*? Hardly, since the property of belonging to a certain ethnic group depends (in the way suggested above) on environmental and historical factors. Descriptivism is incompatible with this, for it takes the speakers' conception of the property denoted by an *EGT* to be entirely *non-demonstrative*. As we have seen, this has the implausible consequence that, whenever the speakers' only conception of the property denoted by an *EGT* is true, not of all and only the members of the intended group, but of the members of some *other* group, then the extension of their tokens of that term would be the property of belonging to this other group. We may conclude that, although some details of the causal account proposed here remain to be worked out, it is now plain that it will perform better than its descriptivist rival.

NOTES

- 1 In popular discourse, the proper use of ethnic-group terms is often disputed (see, for instance, Peter Schmidt 2003). Among philosophers, there is recent interest in both the proper-use question and the question of the semantic properties of such terms. Jorge Gracia (2000) addresses both: regarding the first, he offers some social and political reasons justifying the use of ethnic groups terms; regarding the second, he takes them to be 'ethnic names' whose semantic properties may be accommodated by a Wittgensteinian version of the cluster theory (a view I dispute; see my argument in section VI here). Ofelia Schutte (2000) has written on issues of political philosophy involving ethnic-group and nationality terms, asking whether their usage undermines or contributes to what she regards as a current erosion of minority group rights in the USA. I formerly proposed a form referentialism about ethnic-group terms that is stronger than the causal theory developed here (see Nuccetelli 2001 and 2002). Anthony Appiah (1996) discusses a direct reference account and a descriptive semantics of racial-group terms. Although he remains neutral between these theories, he does argue that any such term would come out empty under either theory. In the case of racial-group terms, he contends, neither essences nor descriptions are plausible candidates for the grounding of their extension. Yet, on his view, racial-group terms do have a role to play in explanation and prediction of action, no less than 'witchcraft', 'phlogiston', and other empty words.
- 2 Can someone who holds no religious beliefs at all be a Muslim? Akeel Bilgrami (1995), in a personal anecdote, recounts how he was 'a Muslim for five minutes' during an unfriendly encounter in a Hindu neighborhood in India. But surely he is using the term, 'Muslim', equivocally here: it is as an *ethnic group term* that he means it, not as a religious group term.
- 3 Ian Hacking (1986) has argued that categories of people such as *heterosexual* and *homosexual* are made up for the purpose of individual and social control. But if nominalism of this sort were indeed true of ethnic groups, then the doctrine proposed here could not get off the ground. Since such nominalists would be adopting a position that is counterintuitive, however, at least in the case of ethnic groups, the burden of argument would therefore be on them.
- 4 Without group terms, we can't talk about ethnic prejudice and discrimination, among other things. For example, if we can't use those terms at all, then we can't explain why Rosa Parks was asked to sit in the back of the bus (but didn't), or why there was a controversy over Mel Gibson's recent film. If we can't use the group terms, 'African American' and 'Jew', then how can we say what all the fuss was about in those cases?
- 5 See Kripke 1972 and Putnam 1975. Note that neo-Fregeans such as Gareth Evans (1982), John McDowell (1984), and David Wiggins (1993) are not committed to descriptivism as construed here. For on their view, the senses of *NBKTs* may be cashed out as the speaker's *demonstrative* ways of thinking about the extension of those terms. For example, if the mode of presentation of 'water' incorporates the speaker's demonstrative way of thinking about H₂O in the actual world, then the term would be *direct* in the way required by a causal theory.
- 6 I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this journal, who rightly pointed to the importance for the validity of the argument of this premise's being made explicit.
- 7 Here an appeal to a shared sense made up of some universal features of all members of a certain group (e.g., their being humans and creatures that breathe) would not, of course, rescue descriptivism from this objection, since such features could constitute, neither individually nor jointly, a sense of the sort required by the descriptivist thesis (i).
- 8 The *locus classicus* for the cluster theory is Searle (1958) – though it may also be ascribed to Wittgenstein (see Kripke 1972).
- 9 On Putnam's view (1975: pp. 231–34), *NBKTs* pick out natural and biological *kinds* rather than *properties*. But I have argued that, in counterfactual scenarios, this entails implausible variations in the extension of those terms. Cf. Scott Soames 2002.
- 10 See Putnam 1975 and Francois Recanati 1993.
- 11 At the same time, the causal theory accommodates the fact that further contact and expert knowledge could at any time produce changes in the speakers' conceptions of the properties

picked out by their tokens of *NBKTs*, as for example happened to 'fish' when it came to be generally understood that the property of *being a porpoise* (or that of *being a whale*) did not fall within its extension.

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Received 11 August 2004

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