

Against causal descriptivism

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Abstract Causal descriptivism and its relative nominal descriptivism are critically examined. It is argued that they do not manage to undermine the principal conclusions of the new theory of reference.

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1 Introduction

The new theory of reference (due to Kripke, Donnellan, Putnam and others) maintains, against the more traditional descriptivist views on meaning, that the meaning of an expression is not in general determined by a description (or a cluster of descriptions) speakers associate with the expression. More generally, it argues that meaning is not determined only by what is internal to the speakers' mind, but that the social and physical environment may also play some role in it. It is assumed here that meaning, whatever else it may be, determines the reference, or the extension, of an expression.

In its classical form, descriptivism now has apparently few adherents. There is, however, a new form of descriptivism, which hopes to restore the old order.

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Its ingenious idea is, so to say, to mimic the new causal-historical theory of reference in its descriptions; hence its name “causal descriptivism”. Such a form of descriptivism has been suggested by David Lewis, Frederick Kroon, and Frank Jackson (see Lewis 1984; Kroon 1987; Jackson 1998), for example, and seems to enjoy some popularity.

In its simplest form, causal descriptivism submits that speakers associate with, say, “Einstein”, a description along the lines of

[1] The entity that caused my current use of “Einstein”.

More generally, one may express the basic idea of causal descriptivism schematically as follows: speakers associate with a name “N” a description of the form

[2] The entity standing in relation R to my current use of the name “N”,

and this description determines the reference of “N”. The relation R here is drawn from the rival non-descriptivist (e.g., causal-historical) theory of reference.

There is also another somewhat related recent variant of descriptivism, favored for example by Searle (1983), Bach (1987) and Katz (1990, 1994), called *nominal descriptivism* or *metalinguistic descriptivism*.¹ According to it, a description, which suits the purpose, for a proper name “N”, is of the form

[3] The thing to which “N” refers.

At first sight, causal descriptivism (or its relative nominal descriptivism) may appear appealing, but I shall argue that upon closer scrutiny, it turns out to be quite problematic (see also Devitt and Sterelny 1999; Soames 2001).

2 From Frege’s puzzles to descriptivism

Before proceeding, it would be appropriate to briefly consider what is standardly meant by descriptivism, and its place in the field of the theories of meaning and reference.

The simplest theory of meaning for proper names is *the Millian view*, which states that a name designates an object, but does not have any additional sense or meaning. The analogous view for predicates, which one may call *extensionalism*, says that the meaning of a predicate is simply its extension.

Such views may be attractive for their simplicity, but many philosophers have thought that they face intolerable problems, often called *Frege’s Puzzles*. For example, according to the Millian view, a non-referring name such as “Pegasus” has no meaning, and a sentence containing such a name, for example

[4] Pegasus flies

is likewise meaningless. So is

¹ Sometimes it is taken as a form of causal descriptivism (see, e.g., Kroon 1987).

[5] Pegasus does not exist.

But clearly they are meaningful; and at least the latter is even true.

In addition, extensionalism faces difficult problems with expressions, which have the same extension but differ in meaning. A classical example is the pair “cordate” (an animal having a heart) and “renate” (an animal having kidneys); they are presumably co-extensive, but clearly they differ in meaning. For instance, extensionalism implies that the sentences

[6] Cordates are renates

and

[7] Cordates are cordates

have the same meaning. But it seems that in fact, they differ radically in meaning: their cognitive value is quite different.

Problems such as these have led many to favor descriptivism, the view that, very roughly, there is more to the meaning of an expression than its reference or extension namely, some sort of descriptive content (see, e.g., Searle 1967). There are many variants of descriptivism, but their common idea is that the meaning, or the descriptive content, of an expression is given by a description (or a cluster of descriptions) that is analytically associated with the expression; the expression is synonymous with the associated description, and the description determines which entities belong to the extension of the expression.²

Traditional descriptivism is able to solve Frege’s Puzzles nicely. If “Pegasus” means the same as, say, “The winged horse”, there is no problem in considering [4] and [5] as meaningful. Also, if one associates different, meaning-expressing descriptions with “cordate” and “renate”, such as “having hearts” and “having kidneys”, respectively, one can conclude that [6] and [7] indeed have different meanings, as one would expect.

Nevertheless, the classical versions of descriptivism have long been out of fashion, for there is wide agreement that they lead to several unbearable consequences (this is, of course, due to the various arguments of Donnellan, Kripke, Putnam, Burge and others). This has made the new theory of reference quite popular. Let us next recall what have been its main claims.

3 The new theory of reference

To begin with, it is important to keep in mind that the adherents of the new theory (e.g., Kripke and Putnam) never denied that one may use descriptions to fix the reference of an expression; rather, their essential point was that such uses of descriptions do not engender synonymies. In other words, the main

² Some later-day descriptivists, e.g., Katz, defend descriptivism (in their favorite form) only as applied to proper names, not to general terms. But this is odd; Frege’s puzzles arise equally seriously with proper names and general terms. Such a local descriptivism is thus quite artificial, for it leaves the puzzles totally unsolved in the case of the latter.

focus has also always been on meaning (whatever that is) and related issues (such as synonymy, i.e., the sameness of meaning), and not solely on reference and extension.

Kripke (1980) has three main arguments against descriptivism, “unwanted necessity”, “lost rigidity” and “arguments from ignorance and error”. The first two do not even make sense if descriptivism is understood only as a theory of reference fixation, and not also as a theory of meaning. To be sure, Kripke also briefly considered (critically) descriptivism as a mere theory of reference-fixing, but this is certainly a side issue. And Putnam writes that part of the significance of the new theory of reference is that “by denying that proper names and natural kind words are synonymous with definite descriptions or conjunctions of criteria, the new theory makes possible the new kind of theory of necessity” (Putnam 1983).

Consequently, an effective descriptivist reply to the challenge of the new theory of reference presumably suggests that there is, after all, a descriptivist account of *meaning* (and not just reference-fixing) which avoids the alleged counter examples.³ One must thus ask just how good a theory of meaning can causal descriptivism, or nominal descriptivism, provide.

Also, although the notion of speaker meaning may have its uses, it is not the notion at stake. Rather, what philosophers have been interested in here is conventional linguistic meaning which is shared and which does not vary from speaker to speaker.⁴ Arguably, such a notion of meaning is not reducible to speaker meaning (see, e.g., Lycan 2000, Chap. 7). Meaning, in such a sense, whatever it is, is what an expression and its translation, or synonym, share.

Putnam (1975) explicated the targeted traditional view of meaning as containing two assumptions:

- (I) That knowing the meaning of an expression is just a matter of being in a certain psychological state in the narrow sense, that is to say, in a state that does not presuppose the existence of any individual other than the subject;
- (II) that the meaning of an expression determines its extension, in the sense that sameness of meaning entails sameness of extension.

Putnam’s main conclusion is that these assumptions cannot both be true, and, moreover, that it is much less problematic to give up assumption (I); therefore, “meanings’ just ain’t in the head” (i.e., semantic internalism is false). Can causal descriptivism, or nominal descriptivism, provide a way of avoiding such conclusions?

³ I do not intend to suggest that all philosophers mentioned above in connection with causal descriptivism and nominal descriptivism assume that the relevant descriptions are synonymous with the expressions in question. Kroon and Jackson, for example, explicitly deny this (although Jackson nevertheless says that names abbreviate descriptions I find this extremely puzzling). However, in my mind this amounts to changing the subject. See also the conclusions below.

⁴ What the arguments below require is only that meanings are at least in principle shareable and not essentially private; whether or not meaning is common to all speakers of a language is irrelevant for them.

4 Critical appraisal of causal descriptivism

The key motivation for moving from simple Millianism and extensionalism to descriptivism has thus always been the desire to solve Frege's puzzles.⁵ Like the more traditional forms of descriptivism, causal descriptivism and nominal descriptivism also seem to easily solve Frege's problem of co-extensional expressions with different meaning, for they too associate different descriptions to such expressions. However, they do not do as well in other respects.

The association of a description with an expression yields a mental state. But it is unclear whether the resulting state is narrow, as Putnam required, when the description is a causal description. In particular, in its simple form (i.e., something like [1] above), causal descriptivism seems to violate the narrowness requirement, for presumably my use of any expression has some cause. (It is less than obvious whether or not other variants of causal descriptivism satisfy the constraint, and it is hard to judge this conclusively, given the rather sketchy form of the theory.)

Also, causal descriptivism has to face the difficult problem of psychological plausibility; in its more sophisticated forms, it seems to require a rather fantastic amount of conceptual competence and semantic knowledge on the part of the average speaker. It assumes that one cannot designate unless one has a theory of designation, and that the theory is true. In other words, everyone who designates must know the right "R". But quite probably nobody has yet managed in that (cf. Devitt and Sterelny 1999, p. 61).

Moreover, recall that one main motivation of descriptivism has always been the desire to solve the puzzle of non-referring expressions. Simple causal descriptivism is, however, of little help, for it seems to postulate odd referents for such expressions (e.g., the cause of my present usage of "Pegasus"). Note also that the cause of my current use of "Einstein", or "cordate", may be quite different from the cause of, say, David Kaplan's current use of them. Hence simple causal descriptivism easily makes meaning vary wildly from speaker to speaker.

More generally, causal descriptivism in all its usual forms is quite hopeless as a theory of shared linguistic meaning. For it attaches different meanings to different speakers the descriptions it suggests contain indexicals ("my current use", etc.) referring to the speaker. Thus it entails that meanings are necessarily private.

Further, even if one managed to eliminate such indexicality, causal descriptivism is still in trouble with synonymity and translation its descriptions are essentially relative to a particular expression in a particular language. Nominal descriptivism faces the same problem. Consider for example "rabbit". According to causal descriptivism and nominal descriptivism

⁵ Kroon, however, thinks that descriptivism need not solve Frege's Puzzles; clearly his idea of descriptivism is very different from the usual one. For example Searle and Katz, on the other hand, think that it needs, and manages, to do that.

(interpreted as theories of meaning), speakers associate with it either a description of the form

[8] The entities standing in relation R to “rabbit” (CD)

or of the form

[9] The entities in the extension of “rabbit”, (ND)

which expresses its meaning. However, presumably the French word “lapin”, for example, has the same meaning as “rabbit”. But it is quite preposterous to assume that a monolingual French speaker associates with “lapin” a description such as [8] or [9] which mentions an English word, or that such a description would express the meaning of the French word “lapin”.

Analogously, both causal descriptivism and nominal descriptivism attach different descriptions to strictly synonymous expressions in one language, for example “furze” and “gorse”, which supposedly have the same meaning. Yet it is absurd to assume that speakers associate with the expression “furze” a description of the form

[10] The entities standing in relation R to “gorse”, (CD)

or of the form

[11] The entities in the extension of “gorse”, (ND)

or that such a description, which mentions “gorse”, expresses the meaning of “furze”. Certainly it is possible for the average speaker to be ignorant of the fact that these two words mean exactly the same, or to be familiar with just one of them.

We may thus conclude that neither causal descriptivism nor nominal descriptivism provides a plausible theory of meaning. If, on the other hand, they are presented merely as theories of reference fixation, they are not particularly interesting, for as such, they are not really incompatible with the primary moral of the new theory of reference. Further, they also then fail in the main job that descriptivism was supposed to do, that is, to solve Frege’s Puzzles; and that would make them quite unmotivated. Be that as it may, the fact is that however one prefers to define “descriptivism”, causal descriptivism and nominal descriptivism manage in no way to undermine the principal conclusions of the new theory of reference.

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