

Naming and Referring Heidi Savage

Summary

This book is about whether reference to an individual is an essential characteristic of a proper name — a widely held view — or whether it is simply a contingent feature. I will argue that it is a contingent feature of names in general, but that for, at least some names, having a referent is part of its semantic content.

To begin exploring the nature of proper names, two questions need resolving. First, as we saw, we need to know whether all names in particular contexts are themselves referring devices — whether they are referential in the way Kripke and others have convincingly argued. Second, we also need to know whether recognizing names types and the consequent issue of their ambiguity can be resolved simply by distinguishing between name types and tokens thereof. My own answers to both questions is negative.

As Strawson pointed out, with respect to expressions in general, we need three separate distinctions in order to fully grasp their meaning. We must understand the expression type, an utterance within a given context — as a token of that type — and a specific use to which that token is being put. Let us call these latter uses “name token uses.”

For example, with respect to proper names, the name type MONTAGUE has no specific truth-evaluable content. However, on a given occasion of utterance, it may very well have truth-evaluable content. Suppose we are uttering it in the context of a philosophy of language class in while of discussing the work of the famous logician that goes by that name. This utterance of the name ‘Montague’ does indeed have truth-evaluable content. But utterances or tokens of a name, in and of themselves, make no such guarantee. For example, the name type spelled M-o-n-t-a-g-u-e may be uttered or tokened on an occasion in which it refers to the famous logician, but it might also refer to nothing, if used, let us say, in a work of fiction, or if we are simply practicing that name’s proper pronunciation, or even just wanting to make some noise.

Another feature that distinguishes names tokens from name token uses is that a given token of a name can be used any which way you like: we could decide to address someone as ‘Stupid’ in an ironic manner, but the conversational context does not determine the content of that name all on its own, at least not consistently with maintaining that we could use the same name to dub a particular dog that is not the brightest within the same context. Furthermore, such tokening of a name type does not make that an individual’s name — more is needed for that fact to obtain.

We cannot, then, solely rely on the idea that while a name type may have no truth-evaluable content, name tokens do, relative to contexts of utterance, since as we’ve seen, some of them do not. We also need to distinguish certain uses of names. We have a use for the name ‘Montague’ which, if uttered on a given occasion, will invoke that use. But there might also be other uses. We might, for instance, name our particularly smart poodle ‘Montague’

as well. This would invoke a different use of the name 'Montague' altogether.

To illustrate these distinctions even more clearly, we might utter the name type MONTAGUE in different contexts, and be invoking one and the same use, if for instance, students later studying for their upcoming philosophy of language test might. Or, we might utter the name type in the same context, while invoking different uses. If, for example, I am conversing with someone about my dog Montague, while my interlocutor is discussing the famous logician.

Having brought these distinctions to bear on the issue, we can now ask: are all name token uses of names referential? To which the answer again is negative based on the fact that there are name token uses that are not only non-referential, they are not even conditionally referential, and yet still have meaning, the paradigm cases of which involve the use of fictional names.

We need a theory that accomplishes three things then: it must recognize the data concerning the referential uses of names aptly characterized by many philosophers in the literature on proper names; it must account for the fact that name types themselves are either indeterminate or ambiguous with respect to their extensions; last, it must recognize that we cannot settle the second issue by merely relying on name tokens and conversational contexts to determine a name's content.

On the view being proposed — the context of introduction thesis, or the CIT — a particular use of a proper name is established when an token of a certain name type occurs in a special kind of context, a context of introduction, a context best understood as composed of a meta-linguistic performative act. This kind of context establishes a use for that name that makes its history or origin essential for understanding or appropriately deploying it. Still, not even this entails that that name's origin must involve the christening or baptism of an individual referent.

As we've seen, then, we need not just two, but three distinctions with respect to proper names. There are name types, name tokens, and name token uses. We can think of a name type as comprised of a set of instances, which may or may not be tokened. In turn, name tokens are understood as proper subset of instances of a name type — those that have physical instantiations. Name token uses will then we understood as a proper subset of name tokens — those that occurred in a context of introduction.

Despite this needed complexity, however, the CIT does hold that there is a unifying feature that characterizes all proper names. Names are special because they will, of necessity, be rigid expressions, since the meaning of a name token use is determined by its particular context of introduction, and the content with which it was associated in that context. Names are also de jure expressions because speakers can token name types in contexts of introduction in order to stipulate for them a new name token use. In short, I offer an alternative account of the meaning of proper names that maintains the importance of their history for determining their appropriate application or use, does not make referring to an individual an essential property of their meaning, and yet, still respects Kripke's insight that names are de jure rigid expressions.

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Chapter Overviews

Chapter One: Introduction

Here I note that I am approaching the problems in this book with a truth-theoretic apparatus, and I note its weaknesses. I also explain my methodology and overarching philosophical commitments that lead me to view the problems I address in the ways in which I do.

Chapter Two: An Introduction to Proper Names for the Uninitiated

Chapter two describes a variety of different theories of the meaning of a proper name, including classical descriptivism, Kripke's innovative theory, historical approaches, predicate views, hybrid views, indexicalist views, and variabilism. This chapter's purpose is simply to familiarize the reader with the various options regarding theories of the semantics of proper names, and with the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Chapter Three: The Context of Introduction Thesis

In Chapter Three, I give a detailed account of a bipartite view of proper names -- that they have two parts to their semantic value, only one of which contributes directly to their truth conditional content. The other part of a proper name's semantic value informs a speaker about its referential status, and therefore, how to evaluate a sentence containing it for truth with respect to particular rules of predication.

On my view, names are context-sensitive; there are not multiple names spelled M-o-n-t-a-g-u-e. There is only one name, but tokens of that name are relativized to contexts such that they can take on different values depending on which context is salient in a particular conversation. These constitute token uses for proper names, and token uses are created by a name being tokened in contexts of introduction. This allows us to accommodate the fact that names are not only devices that track their origins, they are also devices that are highly influenced by a speaker's intentions to introduce them into the language. They are indeed *de jure* rigid expressions. I show how this is superior to ambiguity views, and I explain its implications for the identity conditions of names in general.

Chapter Four: Application to Fictional Names

In this chapter, I show how my view can be used to explain the existence of and meaningfulness of fictional names, one of the motivating forces for offering an alternative view in the first place. Here I argue that a name's content need not be referential. In fact, the content of a fictional name is not a referent at all, but rather a set of properties. The relation in this case between the linguistic symbol and its content is not one of reference. This lets us get true statements about fictional characters relying on Montague's theory of predication, and also lets us get true statements about real world referents by relying on a Russellian picture of predication. Of course, I also spend some time explaining why we would want to get true statements about fictional characters in the first place, and I consider alternatives, those that deny that such statements can be true, and I ultimately reject them. Additionally, in this part of the book, I offer more detail about the nature of that part of a name's semantic value that determines which predication rule is appropriate, and I explore the idea that not all semantic relations need be denotational or designational. Indeed, I offer a criterion of ontological commitment alternative to Quine's that holds that we are committed only to those things that can have contingent properties. Since fictional characters are essentially defined by their properties, we are not ontologically committed to their existence.

Chapter Five : Application to Descriptive Names

In Chapter Five, I deal with another kind of name that has proved difficult to explain. Specifically, descriptive names. Descriptive names appear to instantiate features that fit with both classical descriptivist theories of proper names and with Kripkean treatments. Like descriptivism predicts, their reference is not steadfast. However, like Kripke predicts, they behave in modal contexts in the same way as ordinary referential names. I apply my view to these names illustrating how it can explain these facts. What is required to explain descriptive names is a distinction between rigid expressions over time and rigid expressions

at a time. With this distinction in hand, I claim that descriptive names, at any given time, are rigid expressions whose reference is pragmatically fixed a la Donnellan by the description with which they are associated, but that reference can be re-fixed over time. Furthermore, these facts can be explained only if we have a bipartite view of a proper name's semantic value, like the view I propose.

Chapter Six: Application to Other Empty Names

Chapter Six lends further support for rejecting the standard Kripkean view given the variety we see in empty names. Here I show that Kripke's uniform treatment of all empty names cannot accommodate that variety. For example, some empty names fail to refer for metaphysical reasons, while others do so for semantic reasons. Furthermore, some empty names are only contingently non-referring, while others are necessarily non-referring. We need a view that can explain these varieties of empty names. However, we must not get only the right result -- that they are empty -- we must get that result for the right reason. By applying my view I show how we can do this.

Chapter Seven: Application to Attributive, and Quantificational, and Ambiguous Contexts

Chapter Seven addresses issues that too have been resistant to resolution. For example, we sometimes use names in a way that suggests that someone resembles another who bears a certain name, as in the sentence 'Jack is a real Einstein'. I argue that my view, properly expanded, can explain such uses. Since, on my view, some names can have sets of properties associated with them, we could in principle evaluate this last sentence as asserting that the set of properties associated with the name 'Jack' resembles or even overlaps with the set of properties associated with the name 'Einstein'. The logical form of sentences like these, then, is actually comparative rather than predicative. Quantificational contexts are slightly more complicated. These cases involve constructions like 'The Heidi I know is a real chatterbox', and 'All of the Heidi's in the class were real chatterboxes'. We quantify only over phrases that are common nouns. Hence, names must be common nouns if we are to take the previous sentences at face value. I suggest we don't. Instead, we should think of the role the name is playing in such constructions as directly referring to a domain of discourse, as direct domain specifiers. On this view, 'The Heidi I know is a real chatterbox' becomes 'Of that person I know named 'Heidi', she is a real chatterbox'. Mutatis mutandis, 'All of the Heidi's in the class were real chatterboxes' becomes 'Of those named 'Heidi' in the class, all of them were chatterboxes'. Disambiguation cases are dealt with similarly so that a sentence like 'That Heidi, the one on the left, is a real chatterbox' becomes 'Of those named 'Heidi' on the left, she is a real chatterbox'. The syntax of English allows us to paraphrase away quantification over names, and appeal to the semantic idea that such constructions ought to be understood as devices of direct reference. Once we have directly picked out a domain of discourse, as we do regarding those named 'Heidi' in the class, we can also use pronouns normally understood as either anaphoric, or even as unbound deictic phrases, should we so wish. What we do is make pronominal statements about those individuals contained within domains of discourse. This requires an explanation of the mechanism in place for accomplishing this feat, but the issue is not insurmountable. In the end, this analysis eliminates the apparent predicative uses of proper names.

Additionally, anyone who has it that quantifier restrictions are themselves quantificational faces several challenges. If she wishes to delineate a very specific set, she must be able to delineate that set uniquely, and this could in principle lead to ever increasing refinements of more and more specific delineations. And if the latter project does not succeed, then we must face an under-determination problem of domain specification. In contrast, if we think we can pick out domains directly, no such problems arise.

Chapter Eight: Concluding Remarks

I finish by returning to the different views introduced in the first chapter, and compare them to my own view noting the advantages and disadvantages of each. I claim that my view has more explanatory power than the others, fewer disadvantages, and that it is a well-motivated theory. I conclude therefore that my view of proper names ought to be accepted as the correct one.

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