Russell's Eccentricity

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Abstract

Russell claims that ordinary proper names are *eccentric*, i.e. that the semantic referent of a name is determined by the descriptive condition that the *individual utterer* of the name associates with the name. This is deeply puzzling, for the evidence that names are subject to interpersonal coordination seems irrefutable. One way of making sense of Russell's view would be to claim that he has been systematically misinterpreted and did not, in fact, offer a semantic theory at all. Such a view is put forward in Sainsbury (2002). Sainsbury claims that Russellian descriptivism is not the theory that the thought in the mind of the speaker *determines* the semantic reference of a name, but simply a theory *about* the thought in the mind of the speaker using a name. I argue that the truth is subtly different, and points the way towards an intuitive explanation of Russell's eccentricity.

1 Introduction

Russell's *descriptivist* theory of the reference of proper names states that the referent of a name N is the individual that meets the descriptive condition that the utterer of N associates with N as its semantic content. This is typically contrasted to Kripke's *causal* view, which states that the referent of a name N is the individual that was baptized N at the beginning of the causal chain from which the utterer inherited N.

There is something deeply puzzling about the Russellian view. Russell claims that proper names are *eccentric*, i.e. that the semantic referent of a name is determined by the descriptive condition that the *individual utterer* of the name associates with the name[1]. Yet denying that there is an interpersonal convention governing the application of 'Quine' or 'Frege' seems as strange as denying that the convention of driving on the left-hand side of the road in the UK is an interpersonal convention. For any given individual, most of the names employed by the individual are learnt from others, not stipulated to be used in a certain way by that individual. Furthermore, we try to follow *common standards* when using names, we *correct our own usage* when it is shown to clash with the common standard governing a name, we also *correct others* when their usage clashes with such a common standard. Such behaviour is indicative of, and partly *constitutive* of, the existence of an interpersonal convention.

It is exactly Russell's commitment to eccentricity that left him most vulnerable to the attacks in *Naming and Necessity* (1980). While Kripke's modal

[1] When speaking of 'Russell's views' I speak of one relatively stable and continuous set of views held from 'On denoting' onwards.

argument can be overcome by rigidifying the relevant definite descriptions, the so-called 'semantic' arguments are not dealt with as easily. Kripke pointed out that speakers frequently do not have the information that Russell's theory seems to require of them. Furthermore, such information is not required in order to semantically refer. It is for this reason that subsequent descriptivist theories (e.g. causal descriptivism (Lewis 1984), meta-linguistic descriptivism (Bach 1987)), look very different from Russell's theory and impose much fewer cognitive constraints on name-users.

The evidence that the semantic reference of most proper names is determined by interpersonal convention seems as conclusive as can be[2]. Yet it seems that Russell denied it. We may be tempted to square this particular circle by interpreting Russell as denying that the semantic reference of a name is a matter of convention, at least in any ordinary sense of the term. This suggestion, however, is not particularly promising, as Russell explicitly states that the link between a name and its referent is conventional[3]. Hence it seems Russell must be interpreted as saying that names are subject to personal, i.e. individualistic (eccentric) conventions[4].

An alternative way of accounting for Russell's deeply puzzling commitment to eccentricity would be to deny that Russell ever offered a theory of semantic reference. Mark Sainsbury (2002)[5] has claimed that the standard interpretation of Russell is defective in this way. The common view is that Russell is a semantic descriptivist who believed that a common name is equivalent to, or abbreviates, a definite description in the mind of the speaker. Sainsbury claims that Russell did have a descriptivist theory, but that this descriptivist theory was not about semantic reference at all (2002: 87). Rather, Russell's views were about "the thought in the mind of the speaker" (2002: 86) upon an occasion of use. Russell's interest was in capturing the thoughts and idiolectical meaning of the speaker (2002: 89), not in the semantic referent of a term in a public language, as is the case with Kripke (2002: 89). Furthermore, on those rare occasions that Russell does turn his attention to semantic reference, his views are nearly identical to Kripke's. Russell, in fact, also views names as Millian, rigid designators (2002: 87).

Two clarifications may be of use. First, Sainsbury also suggests that, while

[2]In fact, Russell's view is sometimes referred to as 'famous deeds' descriptivism; examples given - e.g. 'Bismarck', 'Scott' - concern the most well-known names. His examples, in other words, typically concerned exactly those names that are subject to our *most enduring* interpersonal linguistic conventions.

[3]"*Scott* is merely a noise or shape conventionally used to designate a certain person" (1910: 123). This is no throw-away remark, but occurs in the context of an argument where the notion of a convention is central to the argument. This argument concerns the issue of whether 'Scott is the author of Waverley' can be interpreted as asserting identity of denotation. Russell objects by pointing out that there cannot be a single notion of denotation at play here, for the relation between 'Scott' and Scott is a matter of arbitrary convention alone, whereas the relation between 'the author of Waverley' and Scott is not (1910: 123 - 124).

[4]Strange as eccentricity may seem, Russell's remark that a logically perfect language "would be very largely private to one speaker" (2009: 25) suggests a certain tolerance for such eccentricity.

[5]First published in 1993.

Kripke attacked the view that all names have a user- and occasion-independent description associated with them, Russell allowed such descriptions to vary from user to user and occasion to occasion. There is reason to be skeptical of Sainsbury's interpretation of Kripke[6], but the matter of whether the relevant descriptions may vary in this way is not at issue here. Rather the issue here is whether the description in the mind of the speaker has *any* (direct) semantic relevance at all. Sainsbury challenges the traditional interpretation of Russell by claiming that he did not hold the view that it has any such (direct) semantic relevance.

The second matter relates to the first. Sainsbury's claim that Russell is a Millian is not the result of taking the denotation of the description in the mind of the speaker to be the semantic value of the associated name. Rather the Millianism is the result of a public, i.e. *communal,* process (2002: 92). The thought in the mind of a given speaker does not, *by itself*, serve to determine anything semantic, but may do so in virtue of the speaker being a member of an ''authoritative subset" (2002: 92) of the linguistic community who *jointly* serve to determine the reference of the name.

In summary, Sainsbury claims that Russell did not view the 'semantic content' *or* the 'semantic reference' of a name as determined by the thought in the mind of the speaker. Rather, Russell's theory was simply *about* the thought in the mind of the speaker when uttering a name.

I think that Sainsbury is mostly right when he claims that there is some deep ambiguity at the heart of the clash between Russell and Kripke. I also think that Sainsbury is right when he identifies thoughts and public language as the two fundamental, distinct topics that are at issue here.

Sainsbury's view, however, is not quite correct. I will argue, *contra* Sainsbury, that Russell did set out to write about semantic reference. He did, however, accidentally end up writing about something else, namely the speaker's *beliefs* about the conditions governing the application of a name, i.e. a speaker's *grasp* of the semantic reference of a name.

In section two I defend my interpretive claim against Sainsbury. In sections three and four I give a diagnosis as to how this strange situation came about. In section five I consider an objection based on different conceptions of 'semantics'.

2 *Contra* Sainsbury

It has to immediately be granted that Sainsbury is correct when he says that Russell has a theory about the thought in the mind of the speaker. Russell, at the start of 'Knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description' (1910), states that he is interested in 'what it is that we know in cases where we know propositions about "the so-and-so", without knowing who or what the so-and-so is' (1910: 108). Knowledge is standardly taken to be a matter of belief, i.e.

[6]Sainsbury (2002: 86) acknowledges that Kripke's most direct formulation (1981: 71) of descriptivism is consistent with the view that such descriptions can vary between speakers. Furthermore, in 'A Puzzle About Belief' (1979: 245) Kripke does interpret Russell as allowing the relevant descriptions to vary in this way.

thought, and so Russell is giving a theory of the content of thoughts. Turning his attention to names, Russell states that '*the thought in the mind* of a person using a proper name correctly can generally only be expressed explicitly if we replace the proper name by a description' (1910: 114; my italics), and states that the relevant description 'will vary for different people' (1910: 115). Given such explicit declarations, and others like them, it is indisputable that Russell had a view about thought.

Given the clear verdict presented by the above evidence, it may seem odd that Russell was ever thought to be a descriptivist about the content of names themselves, and not just a descriptivist about the thought in the mind of a speaker uttering a name. The evidence, however, is not as straightforward as the above quotations make it appear. There are, as Sainsbury acknowledges, claims made by Russell that seem to indicate that he is talking about the content of words, not thoughts. In each case where Russell made such a claim concerning names, however, Sainsbury argues that the claim is somehow clarified or interpreted by Russell as a claim concerning thoughts.

The first example presented by Sainsbury will serve to illustrate Sainsbury's general strategy. Consider Russell's claim that 'Common words, even proper names, are usually really descriptions' (1910: 114). Sainsbury objects to interpreting such a claim as a theory about words, not thoughts, on the grounds that Russell immediately clarifies the claim by stating '[t]hat is to say, the thought in the mind of a person using a proper name correctly can generally only be expressed explicitly if we replace the proper name by a description' (1910: 114). Sainsbury follows the same strategy in explaining all Russell's claims concerning names that seem to commit him to semantic descriptivism, and makes a good case for his interpretation.

We should not, however, be convinced. On such an interpretation, Russell seems *extremely* cavalier about switching between speaking of what names mean[7], and speaking of the thoughts that speakers who utter names have in their heads. Sainsbury is correct that Russell explains some claims, first stated in terms of what names mean, in terms of thoughts in the mind of the speaker. If, however, Russell never meant to assert semantic descriptivism, it becomes somewhat of a mystery why the statements in terms of what names mean were made in the first place.

The problem becomes considerably more acute when we remember that Russell introduces his view of names in the context of his view about definite descriptions. There is nothing to suggest that these two views are about different topics entirely, i.e. that Russell switches from considering the *semantic content* of definite descriptions to suddenly only discussing the *thought content* of names. Furthermore, when we consider his view of definite descriptions, it is clear that Russell is writing about what words mean. In 'On denoting' (1905), Russell treats the topic of investigation as straightforwardly semantic; he famously states that 'denoting phrases never have any meaning in themselves,

[7] Or, at least, using locutions indicative of speaking of what names mean. I.e. '[E]ven proper names, as a rule, really stand for description" (1910: 123) , 'The word "German" will again have different meanings for different people' (1910: 115) , and so on.

but that every proposition in whose verbal expression they occur has a meaning' (1905: 480). Russell, throughout 'On denoting', talks in terms of the interpretation of 'phrases', i.e. the meaning of words. Typically, Russell expresses himself by saying things like 'Take as an instance "the father of Charles II was executed". This asserts that there was an x who was the father of Charles II and x was executed' (1905: 481). This claim, and related claims throughout[8], are standardly expressed in terms of some locution indicative of speaking about what words mean, i.e. semantic content[9].

Interpreting the Russellian theory of descriptions as a semantic theory is standard and so I take it this interpretation needs no further defense. This, however, causes deep problems for Sainsbury, who does not dispute that the theory of descriptions is about the meaning of linguistic expressions. The first mention Russell makes of names in 'On denoting' occurs in the context of discussing non-denoting expressions. Some of his examples of such expressions are names, some definite descriptions; Russell gives examples like 'the round square', 'the even prime number other than 2', 'Hamlet' and 'Apollo' (1905: 491). It would be extremely odd to mix them up in this way if Russell wished to provide a *semantics* of definite descriptions, but merely a claim about the *thought content* of names. It is in this context where Russell states that "[a] proposition about Apollo means what we get by substituting what the classical dictionary tells us is meant by Apollo, say 'the sun-god'. All propositions in which Apollo occurs are to be interpreted by the above rules for denoting phrases" (1905: 491). No suggestion to the effect that he is no longer dealing with semantic content is made; in fact, the formulation of the claim in terms of what the proposition (sentence) about Apollo 'means' strongly militates against such an interpretation[10].

My objection to Sainsbury, then, is as follows. Russell's theory of descriptions is presented as a theory about what certain phrases, i.e. words in a language, mean. There is nothing to suggest that Russell views his theory of names as being about another topic entirely. Hence, unless we could argue that Russell's theory of descriptions was also only ever about thoughts, we have to conclude that his theory of names is about the semantic content of names, not (merely) the thought content attached to names[11].

[8]Consider, for instance, in 'Knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description': "This conclusion forces us to analyze descriptive *phrases* occurring in propositions, and to say that the objects denoted by such *phrases* are not constituents of judgments in which such *phrases* occur (unless these objects are explicitly mentioned)" (1910: 128, my italics).

[9]The phrase 'semantic content' is, of course, somewhat anachronistic when employed here. But this is harmless, the argument might equally well have been stated in terms of Russellian locutions like 'meanings of phrases'.

[10]It will also not do to claim that Russell here means to merely discuss names without bearers as a special class. He nowhere indicates that he views names without bearers as semantically unique. Elsewhere he explicitly dismisses the analogous possibility of treating non-denoting definite descriptions like 'the present King of France' as having different logical form than descriptions that do denote. He states that, based on 'parity of form', they must be treated similarly (1910: 122).

[11]Russell takes these thought contents to vary across occasions of use (1910: 115 - 116).

3 Cognitive-semantic coincidence

3.1 A theory of names and a theory of thoughts

Could we argue that Russell's theory of descriptions was only ever supposed to be about thoughts? I think, as indicated above, that Russell's formulation of his claims about descriptions as claims about phrases, as contained in propositions (sentences), straightforwardly rules out this interpretation. It is, of course, true that Russell does frequently, most prominently in 'Knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance', but also in 'On denoting' and elsewhere, talk about 'what we know', i.e. the contents of thought, when discussing definite descriptions. But he similarly, especially in the case of definite descriptions, also states his claims in terms of what linguistic expressions mean. Russell, in fact, seems to switch between talking about what words mean and the knowledge we can thereby be said to have, i.e. thought content associated with them, *without seeming to think that the different locutions amount to a fundamental change in the topic of investigation.* Examples are scattered throughout his writings, for instance:

> When we say 'the so-and-so exists', we mean that there is just one object which is the so-and-so. The proposition '*a* is the so-and-so' means that *a* has the property so-and-so, and nothing else has . 'Sir Joseph Larmor is the Unionist candidate' means 'Sir Joseph Larmor is a Unionist candidate, and no one else is'. 'The Unionist candidate exists' means 'someone is a Unionist candidate, and no one else is.' (1910: 113)

In the first sentence above, Russell speaks about what 'we mean'. Taken literally, this would be a claim about our intentions, i.e. thought contents. This is followed by claims about what two specific sentences mean, i.e. the topic of discussion has now changed to sentence meaning. Such changes in locution seem casual in the extreme if he thought, as Sainsbury alleges, that thought contents and sentence contents are radically different. One may defend Russell by claiming such casualness is justified in the case of definite descriptions, but the same indifference to the distinction between thoughts and linguistic items can be found in his writing about names.

Consider:

> When we use the word "Socrates," we are really using a description. Our thought may be rendered by some such phrase as, "The Master of Plato," or "The philosopher who drank the hemlock," or "The person whom logicians assert to be mortal"... (2009: 29).

In the above passage, Russell switches with the same ease between talking of the word 'Socrates' and the thought we have when we utter such a word.

Also consider:

> Moreover, the description required to express the thought will vary for different people, or for the same person at different times. The

> only thing constant (so long as the name is rightly used) is the object to which the name applies. But so long as this remains constant, the particular description involved usually makes no difference to the truth or falsehood of the proposition in which the name appears (1910: 114).

In the above quotation, Russell starts off by talking about thought content, but, in the last line, talks about the 'proposition', i.e. sentence in which the name appears. Furthermore, the last line strongly suggests that the content of the *sentence* does vary based on the relevant description, despite the fact that the truth value of the sentence remains unaffected[12].

The three passages quoted above are not exceptions, but illustrative of Russell's general practice of causally switching between talking of thought contents and semantic content.

How are we to account for the the ease with which Russell switches, both in the case of definite descriptions and names, between talking about semantic content and thought content? This makes perfect sense if we suppose that Russell thought that, at least in the case of competent speakers, *semantic content and thought content coincide*, i.e. if we can interpret Russell as assuming that, in the case of a competent speaker, the thought content that guides the speaker's act of using a sentence has the same content as the utterance of the sentence itself. On such a view the speaker thinks that p, wishes to communicate that p and, being competent, sincere and so on, assertively uses a sentence that semantically expresses the content that p.

Call the view that semantic content and thought content of utterances, at least, in the case of competent and sincere speakers, coincides in this manner, the view that the relevant utterances exhibit *cognitive-semantic coincidence*. Sentences exhibit such cognitive-semantic coincidence if suitably competent and sincere speakers will utter them if, and only if, their utterance is guided by a thought with the same content as that of the uttered sentence. On the assumption that thought and language are compositional in a similar way, we can speak of sub-sentential expressions as exhibiting cognitive-semantic coincidence in an analogous way.

If a writer assumes that natural language assertions exhibit cognitive-semantic coincidence then such an author can afford to be quite casual about switching between talking about the content of a thought and the content of an utterance. In such a case, what is asserted about thought content is *ipso facto* also taken to be asserted about semantic content, and what is asserted about semantic content, is thereby also taken to be asserted about thought content. If we interpret Russell this way, then his way of articulating his views is no longer almost

[12]If the content of sentences can vary in this way, then, *contra* Sainsbury, Russell must be interpreted as endorsing eccentricity about not only thought-contents, but also *semantic* contents (and also as denying Millianism about semantic content). The passage fits perfectly with interpreting Russell as an eccentric semantic descriptivist; on such a view interchanging descriptions with the same denotation does not typically affect the truth-value of the sentence, though it may do so in intensional contexts.

fantastically sloppy, but merely a matter of ignoring a difference that, given such an assumption, makes little difference[13].

Ascribing to Russell the assumption that assertions in natural language exhibit cognitive-semantic coincidence has two virtues. First, it would explain his practice of casually switching between talking of language and talking of thought. Hence it makes sense of Sainsbury's point that Russell often explains or clarifies a remark which seems to be about semantics with a remark which seems to be about thought, but without forcing us to agree that Russell only ever intended to speak about thought. The second virtue is that, on this interpretation, we do not need to convict the vast majority of the profession of a systematic misinterpretation of Russell. It would vindicate the interpretation in *Naming and Necessity*, and also vindicate the canonical interpretation of Russell. Consider a claim like the following:

> The word 'German' will again have different meanings for different people (1910: 115).

The above claim can be interpreted in its evident sense, namely that the semantic content of a name depends on who utters it, and not as merely being a clumsily expressed claim about thoughts. This is so, even if we do take Russell to also be committed to a claim about varying thought contents.

3.2 Is Russell a Millian?

There is one interpretive issue that remains to be cleared up before we can proceed. Sainsbury's claims that Russell is a Millian (2002: 87, 94). This interpretation is based on the fact that Russell portrays communication as only occurring in virtue of the fact that, when a name is used in an assertion, there is some singular proposition, known by description, that the speaker and hearer share. The passage which most strongly supports this contention is the following:

> It would seem that, when we make a statement about something only known by description, we often *intend* to make our statement, not in the form involving the description, but about the actual thing described. That is to say, when we say anything about Bismarck, we should like, if we could, to make the judgement which Bismarck alone can make, namely, the judgement of which he himself is a constituent. In this we are necessarily defeated, since the actual Bismarck is unknown to us. But we know that there is an object B, called Bismarck, and that B was an astute diplomatist. We can thus describe the proposition we should like to affirm, namely, 'B was an astute diplomat', where B is the object which was Bismarck. If we are describing Bismarck as 'the first Chancellor of the German

[13] This would also make sense of his claim that 'On denoting', while much more focused on semantic content, and 'Knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description', while much more focused on thoughts, are dealing with the same topic (1910: 108).

> Empire', the proposition we should like to affirm may be described as 'the proposition asserting, concerning the actual object which was the first Chancellor of the German Empire, that this object was an astute diplomatist'. What enables us to communicate in spite of the varying descriptions we employ is that we know there is a true proposition concerning the actual Bismarck, and that however we may vary the description (so long as the description is correct) the proposition described is still the same. This proposition, which is described and is known to be true, is what interests us; but we are not acquainted with the proposition itself, and do not know *it*, though we know it is true (1910: 116).

On Sainsbury's interpretation, Russell commits to the claim that, while our thought contents may include some descriptive proposition, the sentence content is some singular proposition concerning Bismarck himself. It is a point in favor of his interpretation that such a view is a much more plausible theory of sentence content than the view that results from adopting (eccentric) semantic descriptivism about names. The question, however, is not which theory is more plausible, but which theory Russell actually held.

Russell does present, in the 'Bismarck' case, the relevant singular proposition as necessary for communication, but he *nowhere* suggests that he thinks that this singular proposition is the semantic content of the sentence which includes 'Bismarck'. In fact, the above passage militates against such an interpretation; in the first sentence Russell says that we would very much like our statement, i.e. what is expressed by the *sentence*, to be about Bismarck, but then proceeds to explain why this is *not* the case. I cannot see how such a claim can be interpreted as not being a *denial* of the view that the sentence is about Bismarck. Hence, while Russell does mention the singular proposition that the Millian would take to be the semantic content of the sentence, the evidence suggests that he did not adopt Millianism. Rather it suggests that he took the relevant singular proposition to be somehow *derivative* of the semantic content, i.e. that the semantic content of the same sentence, used by different people to express different semantic content, must *overlap* in determining the same singular proposition in order for communication to occur. Also note that, so construed, the above quotation, and Russell's remark about the word 'German', shows a clear commitment to eccentricity.

There is also further textual evidence that indicates that Russell did reject Millianism about semantic content. In Russell (1910: 123 – 127), he argues against the view that identity claims like 'Scott is the author of Waverley' assert identity of denotation. Such a dispute is about semantic content, if anything is, and for once Russell mostly states his view in terms of semantic content, not thought content. Russell writes as if Millianism were true, and argues that, on such a view, there is no one relation called 'denotation' that holds between both 'Scott' and Scott and also between 'the author of Waverley' and Scott. The first relation is conventional, the second is factual.

I will not judge Russell's argument here; what is important for present pur-

poses is that Russell explicitly states that he is adopting Millianism for the sake of the argument when he says “I neglect the fact, considered above, that proper names, as a rule, really stand for descriptions’ (1910: 123). Given that the debate is clearly about semantic content, I fail to see how such a claim is anything but a reminder of his denial of Millianism.

The last bit of textual evidence is from *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (2009)[14]. Russell states:

> Proper Names = words for particulars... I have put that down although, as far as *common language* goes, it is obviously false.... What pass for names in language, like "Socrates," "Plato," and so forth, were originally intended to fulfill this function of standing for particulars, and we do accept, in ordinary daily life, as particulars all sorts of things that really are not so. The names that we commonly use, like "Socrates," are really abbreviations for descriptions; not only that, but what they describe are not particulars but complicated systems of classes or series. (2009: 28 - 29, my italics).

In the above Russell states that Millianism, as a doctrine about our common language, is false, that descriptivism is the correct view of such a matter and that particulars are not the contents of the relevant descriptions. In the same passage, when turning his attention to logically proper names, he also states that:

> A name, in the narrow logical sense of a word whose meaning is a particular, can only be applied to a particular with which the speaker is acquainted, because you cannot name anything you are not acquainted with (2009: 29).

While logically proper names are not at issue in this paper, the above passage again underlines that Russell thinks that epistemological issues strongly determine logical ones, i.e. that the content of thoughts strongly constrains semantic contents. This, again, counts in favor of the interpretation I have been urging *contra* Sainsbury, namely that Russell takes thought content and semantic content to coincide, and is discussing *both*[15].

4 How cognitive-semantic coincidence leads to eccentric descriptivism about names

Above I have argued that the origin of the interpretive difficulties concerning Russell’s theory of names is his implicit assumption that language generally

[14]First published 1918.

[15]In a response to Strawson (1950), Russell states that such thought content cannot straightforwardly be equated with the state of mind of the utterer, but may be “a more accurate and analyzed thought to replace the somewhat confused thought which most people at most times have in their heads” (1957: 388). This issue, however, is orthogonal to the current discussion and will not be pursued here.

exhibit cognitive-semantic coincidence, i.e. the view that, if a competent speaker uses a sentence, then the thought in the mind of the speaker will have the same content as the content of the sentence. If we portray him as implicitly committed to this doctrine, then we can interpret him as presenting a theory that is about *both* thought and language.

This is not to say that Russell took it to be an *important* aspect of his view that it applies equally to both the semantics of names and the thought in the mind of a speaker using a name. That he understood the distinction is obvious from the fact that he uses phrases that presuppose an understanding of these issues as distinct[16]. But this is trivial and would apply to all minimally competent language users. I am not, however, claiming that he had, in any philosophically important sense, a clear and steady *appreciation* of the distinction between what a name means and the thought in the mind of a speaker using a name. In fact, we would expect someone implicitly committed to cognitive-semantic coincidence to not attach much importance to the distinction when conducting semantic inquiry.

Below I will claim that Russell's commitment to cognitive-semantic coincidence allows us to make sense of his commitment to eccentricity about names.

There are a lot of sub-sentential expressions where it is plausible to claim that the relevant part of the thought in the mind of the utterer has the same content as that which the sub-sentential expression contributes to the propositions expressed. The conventional content of 'university' can plausibly be claimed to involve the property of being a tertiary educational institution that awards degrees; we can also plausibly claim that if a competent speaker uses the term 'university', then they have some thought, the content of which involves the property of being a tertiary educational institution that awards degrees. The same goes for 'chair' and being a piece of furniture designed to be sat on, 'MVP' and being the most valuable player, and so on. Such terms can reasonably be thought to exhibit cognitive-semantic coincidence.

It became increasingly apparent, as 20th century semantics progressed, that not all terms exhibit cognitive-semantic coincidence. The matter of cognitive-semantic coincidence is somewhat complicated in the case of indexicals, where, even though a version of the claims can be maintained, it is apparent that the cognitive content, conventional content and propositional contribution of indexicals must be distinguished.

The problem becomes considerably more acute when we consider names. To see why this is so, we need only to reflect on some truisms concerning the conventions governing names[17].

We need to first consider a general fact about conventions, namely that they

[16]This is most obvious in 'Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description', but also in the last few paragraphs of 'On Denoting' where the main claims of 'Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description' are first formulated (1905: 492 - 493).

[17]The topic is a surprisingly under-explored one. An enormous amount has been written about the semantics of names and the same goes for the matter of how their reference is secured. Yet few authors have made much of the fact that names, as all linguistic expressions, are conventional.

can be *object-dependent*. Object-dependent conventions are *world-involving*, i.e. they are conventions that definitionally involve some real world object.

To illustrate the notion of an object-dependent convention, consider a series of experiments where we reward people for coordinating their behaviour. A single set of subjects are asked to kick a ball, and those who kick the ball that was kicked by the most people receive a cash prize. Stipulate that the experiment is repeated several times with the same subjects, though the balls are moved around between rounds.

We can expect the subjects to adopt a convention to facilitate their coordination[18]. This convention need not be aimed at a specific ball, i.e. they can adopt the *non-object dependent* convention 'In each round, kick the ball furthest to the left'. However, they could also adopt a convention that advises them to kick the same *specific* ball in each round, i.e. a *object-dependent* convention.

In the case of the object-dependent convention, subjects will need some sort of cognitive fix on the object of the convention. A variety of such cognitive fixes can do the job. Hence, we can expect the subjects to follow *different*, defeasible rules in order to follow a *single* convention with a single content. These rules functions as *proxies* for the convention, i.e. rules like 'Kick the ball that was in the corner in round one', 'Kick the only red ball', 'Kick the ball that satisfies visual stereotype *a*' and so on. Here the existence of an object-dependent conventions gives rise to *distinct* proxy-rules that allow a *single* convention to be followed.

It seems undeniable that most (though not all[19]) of our naming conventions are object-dependent conventions, i.e. defined in terms of concrete individuals. The vast majority of our naming conventions straightforwardly pair names and objects; anyone who knows which object a name is paired with counts as a competent user of the name.

The claim that most of our naming conventions are object-dependent should be uncontroversial. However, making this claim does *not* amount to endorsing a theory of the semantic content of names. Such a view may seem to lead to Millianism, but is equally compatible with meta-linguistic descriptivism, or predicativism, or any number of other views concerning the semantic content of names. It similarly does not force one's hand on matters concerning the theory of reference, beyond providing a truistic side-constraint that all theories must respect.

For the purposes of my argument I need a specific construal of the exact content of our object-dependent naming conventions. I adopt the view that the content of our naming conventions can be stated as rules advising us to use a specific name when we wish to speaker-refer to a specific person[20]. In other words, the content of the naming convention governing 'Obama' is 'Use "Obama" to speaker-refer to Obama', and so on.

[18]Lewis (1969) portrays conventions as arising in this way, i.e. as a response to recurrent coordination games.

[19]The convention governing a non-referring name like 'Santa Claus' cannot be object-dependent.

[20]Such views have been proposed by Stine (1977) and Sainsbury (2015).

In accord with the above, stipulate that there is a person that we decide to conventionally speaker-refer to by using the term 'Glob'. The content of the convention governing 'Glob' can only, using our language, be expressed as 'Use "Glob" to speaker-refer to Glob'. Yet, if I showed this expression of the convention to someone, they will learn nothing above and beyond the knowledge that 'Glob' can be used to conventionally refer. As such they will be able to use 'Glob' to refer, but they are not in a position to employ the term in any *useful* way. It is only once they have some way of identifying Glob, i.e. once they have some *cognitive fix* on Glob, that they can usefully employ 'Glob'.

Speakers will differ in their ways of identifying Glob. One speaker may associate some visual stereotype with 'Glob', another may identify Glob by what he sounds like, another may know that Glob is the tallest man in England, and so on. Hence these speakers will all follow the same convention, namely 'Use "Glob" to speaker-refer to Glob', yet they will all do so in virtue of following distinct, defeasible rules that serve as proxies for the general convention. Rules like 'Use "Glob" to speaker-refer to the person who matches visual stereotype *a*', 'Use "Glob" to speaker-refer to the tallest man in England', and so on, will allow users of 'Glob'[21] to participate in the convention governing 'Glob'. These proxy-rules, however, do *not* give the content of several unique conventions. Rather they are just defeasible strategies used to follow the *single* convention 'Use "Glob" to speaker-refer to Glob'[22]. In this way cognitive-semantic coincidence breaks down in the case of names, just as it does in the case of object dependent conventions generally. For the proxy-rule employed in the thought that allows the speaker to *employ* the convention does not have the same content as the naming convention itself.

Cognitive-semantic coincidence, as construed above, will *always* fail in the case of object-dependent linguistic conventions[23]. This basic fact allows us to explain how it came about that Russell endorsed the puzzling doctrine of eccentricity about names. First, however, note that such failure can be avoided;

[21]Dictionaries typically give us the conventional meaning of a term, but only if this is useful. When they do contain information about names, as they occasionally do, they do not give us the useless '"London" refers to London', but the rather more useful, salient proxy-rule '"London" refers to the capital of England'. The same goes for their treatment of natural kind terms. This, unfortunately, muddles the distinction between conventional content and commonly used proxy-rules.

[22]These proxy-rules must, of course, be rigidified in some or other way. Nothing here depends on how this is to be done, though Kaplan's dthat operator suggest an obvious option. Speakers following the proxy-rules 'Use "Glob" to speaker-refer to dthat[the person who matches visual stereotype *a*]', and 'Use "Glob" to speaker-refer to dthat[the tallest man in England]' can be portrayed as following the *single* convention 'Use "Glob" to speaker-refer to Glob'.

[23]Cognitive-semantic coincidence can occur in cases of non-object-dependent linguistic conventions, i.e. for definite descriptions (in cases where no conventions relevant to defining the component parts are object-dependent), logical connectives, logically proper names (if they exist) and so on. Of course, even where the convention and the thought can coincide, the convention and the thought used to follow the convention are *still conceptually* distinct, even though they have the same content. This can be seen from the fact that, even in such cases, a non-standard proxy-rule that does not have the same content as the convention may still allow one to follow the convention.

cognitive-semantic coincidence can be turned into a truism by allowing the cognitive content to be individuated broadly. By such a standard, it could be allowed that two people can have the same singular thought, even if they follow different proxy-rules and their thoughts have different narrow contents. This, however, does not affect the argument concerning Russell. The examples of descriptive conditions given by Russell make it plain that he did not adopt such a broad standard for individuating thoughts[24]. Strictly speaking, however, this implies that we should not say that cognitive-semantic coincidence always fails for names. Rather, we should say that cognitive-semantics coincidence fails, *given* a narrow standard for the individuation of thought.

My diagnosis, then, is as follows. Despite using a narrow standard for the individuation of thought, Russell implicitly assumed that all terms exhibit cognitive-semantic coincidence. If one adopts such a standard for the individuation of thought, and assumes cognitive-semantic coincidence, then Millianism about the semantics of names is immediately off the table[25]. When he turned his attention to names, Russell noticed that, even in the case of competent name-users, such users typically associate eccentric, i.e. individually variable, cognitive contents (the proxy-rules which guide usage) with a specific name. He then, based on a *prior* commitment to cognitive-semantic coincidence, wrongly took the content of these proxy-rules to also be semantic contents. Given that such proxy-rules can *differ* across people even when the *same* convention is followed, the equation of thought content and semantic content forced him to say that the content of a name can differ based on who is using it, i.e. that names have eccentric semantic content.

The proxy-rules used to follow an object-dependent convention also serve to state a person's *belief* about the content of a naming convention. If my defeasible proxy-rule for 'Gates' is 'Use "Gates" to speaker-refer to the person satisfying visual stereotype a', then this also amounts to the belief that the conventional referent of 'Gates' is the person satisfying visual stereotype a. It is for this reason that I claim that Russell wrote about our *beliefs* about what specific names refer to. If, indeed, it is the case that Russell mistook the multiplicity of proxy-rules that allow us to follow a single convention for a multiplicity of conventions, then this implies that Russell accidentally wrote about such beliefs. In this way he mistook our *beliefs* about the semantic content of names, i.e. our *grasp* of the linguistic facts, for the semantic rules whereby such contents are determined.

[24]Russell individuates thoughts strictly in terms of objects that the subject is acquainted with (1910: 117). Kripke (2008) has claimed that Frege is also committed to something akin to Russellian acquaintance.

[25]One could try to claim that Russell took proper names to be an exception to such cognitive-semantic coincidence. There seem to be no textual evidence in support of such a view. Furthermore - as explained earlier - the casual way in which Russell switches between talking of thoughts and talking of names *qua* linguistic items would militate against such a view.

5 An objection concerning 'semantic' content

I have argued that Russell offered both a theory of semantic reference and a theory of the thought in the mind of a speaker using a name. In doing so I have portrayed Russell as setting out to write about the semantic reference of names, but accidentally writing about our *grasp* of the semantic reference of names.

In making this claim I am, of course, not claiming that Russell took himself to be writing about our grasp of semantic reference. The claim, rather, is that the commitment to cognitive-semantic identity caused him, when dealing with object-dependent conventions, to mistake our grasp of the linguistic facts for the rules whereby semantic content is determined.

One way to object to my claim would be to doubt that Russell's views tracked *any* sort of well-defined and coherent notion. While this would be conceivable, I think it is implausible. On such a view it would be merely an astonishing coincidence that Russell's views just happen coincide with a sensible view of our grasp of the linguistic conventions governing names. Furthermore, it would be a mere coincidence that Russell just happen to be implicitly committed to cognitive-semantic coincidence, i.e. exactly the sort of view that would cause one to mistake our grasp of a convention for the convention as such.

A different way to object to my view would be to admit that Russell's view tracked a coherent notion, but to claim that there is some other entity that we can construe Russell as writing about. In this way someone could, for example, claim that we can make sense of the debate between Russell and Kripke by construing them as not writing about conventionally determined content at all, but as writing about semantic content in some other sense of 'semantic'.

It has already been pointed out, in the introduction to this paper, that Russell treats the semantic reference of names as conventional. Kripke is similarly explicit in this regard[26]. Let us, however, pursue the matter a bit further, as the suspicion that the current account leaves something out may be hard to shake.

The first form that the objection can take is to claim that Russell and Kripke presented rival theories of semantic reference, where 'semantic' is ultimately defined in terms of 'what is said'. Grice, for example, defined the content of 'semantic content' in this way when setting up a contrast between 'what is said' and 'what is communicated' in his theory of implicatures (Grice 1975)[27].

The problem with this view was originally pointed out by Lewis.

> Unless we give it some special technical meaning, the locution 'what is said' is very far from univocal. It can mean the propositional content, in Stalnaker's sense (horizontal or diagonal). It can mean

[26]"The notion of what words can mean, in the language, is semantical: it is given by the conventions of our language" (1977: 263). Kaplan is even more explicit when presenting his theory of indexicals, saying that "[t]he character of an expression is set by linguistic conventions and, in turn, determines the content of the expression in every context" (Kaplan 1989: 505), and that Kaplan and Kripke are normally understood as writing about the same type of topic.

[27]Grice states that what is said is "*closely related* to the conventional meaning of the words" (1975: 44, my italics), but seems hesitant about equating his notion with conventional content.

the exact words. I suspect that it can mean almost anything in between (1980: 97).

The standard response to Lewis's problem is to deny that 'what is said', as used to define 'semantic', is the notion operative in indirect speech reports[28]. Rather 'what is said' is a technical notion, i.e. a term of art with a specific use in semantic theory. Such a response, while avoiding the challenge posed by Lewis, does have the problem of stripping the notion of 'what is said' of its ordinary content. In this way it no longer functions as a specification of 'semantic', but as a place-holder for such a specification, and we are left where we began.

The second form that the objection can take is to drop all mention of putatively technical notions like 'what is said', and to construe the task of semantic theory as a matter of explaining the truth-conditions that competent speakers of a language attribute to utterances. This can typically done by constructing cases where the truth-value of an utterance varies based on one's implicit construal of semantic theory, and then soliciting intuitive judgments as to such truth-values.

This version of the so-called 'method of cases', however, cannot serve to implicitly define 'semantic'. Interestingly, a majority of semanticists are already committed to denying that such a method can serve to identify specifically *semantic* content. While competent speakers of a language will attribute truth-values to utterances when asked to do so, those philosophers who deny that utterances typically *semantically* determine full, truth-conditional propositions (e.g. Bach (1994), Neale (2004), Soames (2009), Carston (2008)), thereby also deny that such judgments can be taken as authoritative judgments about *semantic* content[29]. Rather such authors typically view the judgments of ordinary speakers as pertaining to some pragmatically enriched, non-semantic entity.

The basic point implicit in writing about whether utterances typically semantically determine full propositions is that there are various contentful entities involved in communication. This means that a question about the truth-value of an utterance can be construed as a question about a *variety* of entities. In this way Lewis' problem is not resolved, but reappears in a different form.

While the matter of names does not relate directly to the matter of whether utterances typically express fully truth-conditional propositions, the worry is a general one that similarly applies to names. We can distinguish the speaker's reference of an utterance of a name from its semantic reference. Furthermore, as has been explained here, this must be distinguished from what the speaker *believes* the semantic reference of a name to be, i.e. the speaker's *grasp* of semantic reference. If we construct suitably baroque examples, these can all come apart. Hence we cannot apply the method of cases, as construed above, until we tell the subject of our semantic experiment which one of these entities, and the distinct resulting propositions, we are asking *about.* Until we have done

[28]For a discussion of the issues involved, see Stojanovic (2007).

[29]Minimalists (e.g. Cappelen & Lepore (2005), Borg (2004)) similarly deny that that the proposition communicated by an utterance should be equated with the utterance's semantic content.

so we will not learn anything about semantics, but instead discover *how the test subject interpreted our question.* However, telling the test subject which entity we are asking about renders the idea of using the method of cases to define 'semantic' circular; it amounts to providing a definition of 'semantic', which is what the method was supposed to provide.

An analogy can serve to drive the point home. Let's say I wish to determine how the word-form 'meter' is to be pronounced. Suppose that I have heard people pronouncing the word in radically different ways, and wish to discover which one was standard, i.e. I wish to discover how the vast majority of the population pronounces it. This sounds like a well-defined research-project. I can ask people to pronounce the word, record the results and determine which pronunciation is most common.

Let us suppose, however, that I had the misfortune of only asking trilingual speakers who are fluent in Dutch, English and German. The problem, then, is that the word-form 'meter', exists in English, Dutch and German, and means the same, but is pronounced differently. My results will be without value. If the English pronunciation 'wins' this will not reflect the fact that it is standard. Rather it will reflect the fact that *the majority of the test-subjects took me to be asking about English pronunciation.* In this way my results will not establish the 'proper pronunciation'. Indeed, it could not do so, as there is no such thing as the 'standard pronunciation of "meter"', unless relativised to a language.

In an analogous way the ready availability of an answer to the question 'What are the truth-conditions of this utterance?' only indicates that the test subject took such a question to concern some specific truth-valued entity. In cases where semantic reference, speaker's reference and the utterer's *grasp* of semantic reference come apart, then the test subject's answer merely serves to reveal which one of the three distinct, resulting propositions they took us to be asking about. Such a method does not serve to define 'semantic' content, rather it hides conceptual confusion underneath a seemingly rigorous procedure.

In the above way Lewis' problem, again, stubbornly refuses to yield to a simple solution[30], and the proposed definition of 'semantic' fails.

I cannot, of course, rule out that someone may manage to define a notion of 'semantic' content that allows for Russell's commitment to eccentricity to look less strange. I do take it, however, that the *onus* of coming up with such a definition is on those who wish to defend such a claim.

6 Conclusion

In this paper I have argued against Sainsbury's view that Russell did not provide a theory of the semantic reference of names. My argument is based on two

[30]The above analysis suggests a possible answer as to why Russell's theory of names may seem intuitively compelling. When we have Kripkean intuitions, we are thinking of conventionally determined reference, but when we have Russellian intuitions, we are thinking of a speaker's *grasp* of conventionally determined reference. In this way Lewis may provide the key to explaining why both views can have such considerable intuitive appeal; our conflicting intuitions are the result of an unnoticed conceptual sleight of hand.

claims. First, Russell frequently formulates his theory in terms of semantics. Second, his view about names is supposed to be about the same topic as his view on descriptions, which is uncontroversially a view about semantics.

Sainsbury is correct to insist that the Russellian view is a view about thoughts. This, however, does not prevent Russell's theory from *also* being about semantics, for Russell's writings seem best explained as due to the hidden assumption of cognitive-semantic coincidence.

The basic problem with cognitive-semantic coincidence has been well put by David Kaplan. Writing about Russell's principle of acquaintance, he states:

> Perception is personal, hence local; whereas meaning is conventional, hence communal... This structural incongruity, stemming from the 1903 principle of acquaintance, was sure to doom Russell's identification of the semantic meaning of the sentence we utter with the content of the associated thought, and it did (Kaplan 2005: 993).

It is exactly the problem identified by Kaplan above that becomes most acute in the case of names. Our naming conventions are object-dependent conventions; object-dependent linguistic conventions can be followed in cognitively distinct ways and so the identification of semantic content and thought content breaks down. This, then, creates a situation where it is easy to mistake *cognitive* variety for *semantic* variety.

The related issues of cognitive-semantic coincidence and object dependent conventions jointly serve to explain how Russell ended up defending the *prima facie* implausible doctrine that names are eccentric. While my argument is necessarily a somewhat speculative matter of inference to the best explanation, all the evidence does seem to fit this simple story remarkably well.

To convict Russell[31] of such a confusion is not to claim that his theory is without value. Sainsbury is correct that Russell has a theory about the thoughts in our minds when we use language, and this theory emerges entirely unscathed. Given Russell's epistemological concerns, and the general tenor of his writings, it seems likely that he was much more concerned about such matters than about the nature of our public language. Furthermore, such matters may well ultimately prove to be of much greater importance.

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