

The Quasi-Verbal Dispute Between Kripke and 'Frege-Russell'

Abstract

Traditional descriptivism and Kripkean causalism are standardly interpreted as rival theories on a single topic. I argue that there is no such shared topic, i.e. that there is no question that they can be interpreted as giving rival answers to. The only way to make sense of the commitment to epistemic transparency that characterizes traditional descriptivism is to interpret Russell and Frege as proposing rival accounts of how to characterize a subject's *beliefs* about what names refer to.

1. Introduction

Issues concerning verbal disputes have recently, after a long period of relative neglect, acquired renewed prominence in philosophy¹. In this paper I will defend the claim that a specific dispute, namely the one between traditional descriptivism and Kripkean causalism, construed as theories of semantic reference, involves a type of verbal dispute. I will argue that the parties to the debate, whether they knew it or not, must have been thinking of different phenomena when using terms like 'semantic referent' and the like. This follows from the fact that there is simply no question that traditional descriptivism and Kripkean causalism can be seen as rival answers to.

¹ David Chalmers, for instance, has recently argued that many current disputes in philosophy may be verbal (Chalmers, 2011).

A *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 an utterer of the name associates with *N* as its semantic content. Such a view is commonly ascribed to Russell and Frege. This is typically contrasted to Kripke's *causal theory*, which states that the referent of a name *N* is the individual that was baptised *N* at the beginning of the causal chain from which the utterer inherited *N*.

Mark Sainsbury (2002)² has claimed that the common view of the history of this debate is defective with regards to the work of Russell. The common view is that Russell is a semantic descriptivist in that he believed that the semantic referent of 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" (86) upon an occasion of use. Sainsbury claims that Russell's interest was in capturing the thoughts and idiolectical meaning of the speaker (89) and not in the semantic referent of a term in a public language, as is the case with Kripke (89). Furthermore, on those rare occasions that Russell does turn his attention to semantic reference, his views are nearly identical to Kripke. Russell, in fact, also views names as Millian, rigid designators (87).

Sainsbury claims that Russell did not view the 'semantic content' of a name as determined by the thought in the mind of the speaker. Rather, Russell's theory was

² First published in 1993.

simply *about* the thought in the mind of the speaker when uttering a name. In this paper I defend a related, but distinct view. Sainsbury claims that Russell *explicitly* took his descriptivist theory of reference to be a theory about the thoughts that accompany the use of a name. I wish to claim that Russell's thoughts were not about semantic reference, *whether Russell knew this or not*. Furthermore, while Sainsbury only defends Russell, I wish to claim that none of the traditional, descriptivist theories are about the same topic that Kripke's theory is about, *whether these authors (or Kripke) knew it or not*. The arguments I will make are independent of the arguments made in Sainsbury's article. Despite these differences I do, however, think that Sainsbury is right when he identifies thoughts and public language as the two fundamental, distinct topics that are at issue here.

It may be useful to give a brief explanation of what I mean when I state that I am agnostic about whether these authors explicitly took their thoughts to be about a certain topic, but nonetheless claim that there is a sense in which their thoughts were clearly about that topic. Imagine two people, Andy and Boris, independently walking around a university. Both are quite impressed by the grounds, layout and architecture of where they are walking. Andy thinks that the university is well designed and impressive. Boris, however, mistakenly believes that he is walking around a technical college. Boris now thinks that the technical college is well designed and impressive. Now, even though Andy and Boris' *de dicto* thoughts are different, it would be natural to, under the appropriate circumstances, report that both think the university is beautiful. Even though only Andy is explicitly aware of it, both of their thoughts are, in a sense, *about* the university. It is

quite tricky to explain what this quite natural way of talking amounts to and what makes it true. Maybe we should express what this sense of ‘about’ amounts to by saying that the university was the direct cause of the relevant beliefs and that ‘aboutness’ here just amounts to ‘being caused by’. However, while causation may be a necessary feature of this sense of ‘aboutness’, it is far from sufficient. If I come to hold that pencils are green, purely due to a knock on the head or as a result of ingesting some mind-altering substances, we would not say that my belief is ‘really about’ the knock on my head or about the mind-altering substances. The causation that is involved in such cases did not come about in the appropriate way³. However, independently of whether we can think of this notion of ‘aboutness’ in terms of some constrained notion of causation or not, the fact remains that there is a clear sense in which both Andy and Boris had thoughts about the university, despite only Andy being aware of this. This means that we can differentiate between what someone *thinks* their thoughts are about and what the thoughts are *actually* about. Nothing in my argument depends on theoretical matters as to how this distinction should be understood. Hence I will rely on our intuitive grasp of this distinction when defending the claim that traditional descriptivism is ‘actually about’ one thing, while Kripkean causalism is ‘actually about’ something quite different.

There is a substantial methodological difference between trying to ascertain what an author *thinks* he is writing about and trying to ascertain what an author is *actually* writing about. If one wishes to pursue the first kind of question, as Sainsbury does, then the appropriate method is one of detailed textual exegesis. This is not true of the kind of case

³One attractive option is to identify the object that the belief is about with the object that *rationalizes* the belief.

I will make. The appropriate method when trying to ascertain what an author is actually writing about involves some assumptions about the cognitive faculties of the author, the determination of the most fundamental features of the author's view, and an attempt to find the objects in reality that have, or could plausibly be thought to have, these features. I will follow this method below and show that it gives a clear, definitive result.

2. The speaker's referent, conventional referent and supposed conventional referent

Consider the following three truisms that are rarely, if ever, denied. Firstly, there are public conventions that determine the meanings of words in general and also determine the referents of proper names. In this way it is a convention that 'Quine' refers to Quine and not to Ponting, just as it is a convention that 'ashes' denotes ashes and not shavings. This leads to the definition of the 'conventional referent'.

Conventional referent: The conventional referent of a name *N* is the individual that is determined in virtue of the communal convention governing the use of *N*.

The second truism is that language is *public*, i.e. communal, which implies that it has to be taught to individual speakers. The conventions governing the use of terms are empirical facts, in some sense, and individual speakers can learn these empirical facts correctly or incorrectly. In this way I can wrongly think that 'Quine' refers to Ponting, just as I can wrongly think that 'ashes' denotes shavings. This implies that individual speakers must have linguistic beliefs about the public meanings of terms and that these

beliefs must include beliefs about the conventional referents of proper names. This leads to the definition of the ‘supposed conventional referent’.

Supposed conventional referent: The supposed conventional referent of a name *N* for a speaker *S* is the individual that *S* believes to be the conventional referent of *N*.

The third truism is that proper names are used by speakers when they intend to refer to individuals. This leads to the definition of the ‘speaker’s referent’.

Speaker’s referent: The speaker’s referent of a name *N* on an occasion of use and for a speaker *S* is the individual that *S* intends to refer to upon an occasion of use of *N*.

Note that while the individuals identified in these three ways upon an occasion of the use of a name will tend to be identical, they can diverge. Suppose say that Caroline and Drew are walking down the road when Caroline sees an individual, namely Siddle, behaving oddly. She wishes to warn Drew to stay away from the person behaving oddly. Looking closely, she gets a glimpse of the facial features of Siddle. Her senses are deceived, however, in that the *gestalt* of the facial features that her brief glimpse leaves her with is not that of Siddle, but of Quine. Matters are further complicated by the fact that, when she learned the name of the person with these facial features, i.e. the facial features that she thinks the person in front of her has, she learned it incorrectly. Instead of learning that

the person with such features is called ‘Quine’, she learned that he is called ‘Ponting’. Turning to Drew she now says: “Watch out, Ponting has gone crazy!”

In the above case the speaker’s referent, the supposed conventional referent and the actual conventional referent are three distinct individuals. The speaker’s referent of ‘Ponting’, i.e. the person Caroline was trying to refer to in virtue of the conversational context, is the man behaving oddly, namely Siddle. The conventional referent of ‘Ponting’, i.e. the referent determined by the convention governing ‘Ponting’, is Ponting. The supposed conventional referent, i.e. the person that Caroline thinks that ‘Ponting’ refers to, is Quine.

The tripartite distinction constructed above gives rise to three distinguishable referential intentions. Caroline’s main referential intention, in virtue of the conversational context, was to refer to Siddle, who is the speaker’s referent of her utterance. The category of the supposed conventional referent gives rise to a secondary referential intention to refer to Quine. This referential intention is conceptually distinct from her primary referential intention to refer to Siddle. The category of the actual conventional referent gives rise to a third referential intention, due to the fact that Caroline presumably has a standing intention when using a name to refer to the conventional referent of the name⁴.

⁴ This point is based on two remarks made by Kripke (1977: 264, 273n). (The tripartite distinction developed above is my attempt at a more fine-grained distinction than the one between ‘speaker’s reference’ and ‘semantic reference’ in Kripke’s paper.)

The above example relies on a commonsense distinction between what people mean, what words mean and what individuals think words mean, as applied to names. With the distinction drawn, I can now state the exact claim that I wish to make. This is that traditional descriptivism is about the determination of the supposed conventional referent, i.e. about the relation between Caroline's utterance of 'Ponting' and Quine. Kripke's causal theory is about the determination of the actual conventional referent, i.e. about the relation between Caroline's utterance of 'Ponting' and Ponting.

In other words, the phenomenon in reality that led to the views of the traditional descriptivists is the fact that people have certain beliefs about what public language names refer to. The phenomenon that led to Kripke's views is the fact that words in public languages do have communally determined referents. The evidence that I will give for these claims is that the fundamental theoretical commitments and results of the descriptivist and Kripkean theories have exactly the properties that these phenomena have, or that they could plausibly be thought to have.

I will present three arguments. The first focuses on the theoretical results of the causal theory and descriptivism, the second looks at the descriptivist commitment to epistemic transparency and the third concerns the matter of 'idiolects'.

3. The argument from theoretical results (Dictionary argument)

Let us imagine that someone wanted to compile a dictionary of all the public names of persons that a given speaker - call her Emma - knows⁵. For every given name known to Emma our lexicographer includes a photo of the conventional referent of the name next to the name. Assume that the lexicographer uses the same general method to determine which name goes with which picture as lexicographers generally use when compiling traditional dictionaries. Call the completed result the *Conventional dictionary*.

Now imagine that the same lexicographer is also interested in the linguistic beliefs that Emma, at a specific point in time, has about specific names. Our lexicographer determines all the names that Emma uses, lists them, and, next to each, puts a picture of the individual that Emma believes the name to refer to. Assume that Emma has quite a few mistaken beliefs about the names that she uses. Call the completed result the *Emma dictionary*.

Now create two further documents by applying the traditional, descriptivist theory of names and the Kripkean, causalist theory of names to the names Emma can potentially use in utterances. In the case of Kripkean causalism, determine the individuals baptized at the beginning of the causal chain that led to Emma being in possession of the names she uses. Draw up a list of these names with a picture of the individual identified by the causal theory next to it. Call the result the *Kripkean dictionary*. Imagine that a semantic

⁵ I am restricting this to persons, as countries are hard to take definitive pictures of and mathematical objects are even harder to take pictures of. Of course, nothing stops us from compiling non-pictorial dictionaries of such objects. In the case of mathematical objects, we already do this when we list the values of objects like Avogadro's constant, the Planck length, etc.

descriptivist performed the equivalent task for descriptivism. In other words, the descriptivist somehow identifies the descriptive conditions that, in terms of descriptivist semantics, Emma supposedly identifies with a given name, determines the person, if any, that these conditions apply to, and includes photos of the relevant person next to each name. Call this the *Russellian dictionary*.

The argument can now be stated very simply. The Russellian dictionary and the Kripkean dictionary will give differing results for a certain set of the names that Emma uses. Where these results differ *the Russellian dictionary will give the results in the Emma dictionary, while the Kripkean dictionary will give the results in the Conventional dictionary*. This is because the Conventional dictionary and the Emma dictionary will differ in cases where Emma uses a name incorrectly and precisely these facts about incorrect usage will (almost) always cause a similar divergence between the Kripkean and Russellian dictionaries. Simply put, where the person who compiles the Emma dictionary would explain divergence from the Conventional dictionary by saying that Emma has a false linguistic belief concerning a name, the person who compiles the Russellian dictionary would explain divergence from the Kripkean dictionary by saying that Emma attaches an idiosyncratic descriptive condition to a name. I think that the latter explanation is just a confused way of saying what is perfectly expressed in the former explanation. I will run through an example to illustrate such divergence:

Imagine the case of Emma who listens to a conversation between economics professors and acquires the names 'Paul Krugman' and 'Robert Lucas'. However, Emma did not

understand the conversation well and managed to get the two mixed up. Emma acquires the belief that 'Lucas' refers to a person who won the 2008 Nobel Memorial prize in economics, authored *Peddling Prosperity* and is the most famous current defender of Keynes. In such a case the Conventional dictionary will still list Lucas as the referent of 'Lucas', but the Emma dictionary will list Krugman as the referent of 'Lucas'. This is quite straightforward and is just another way of saying that Emma incorrectly believes that 'Lucas' refers to Krugman.

The above difference will also be reflected in the Kripkean and Russellian dictionary. The Kripkean lexicographer will attempt to trace the use of 'Lucas' back to an original baptism. If we assume that the case of 'Lucas' is not deviant in some way, i.e. is not an Evans-style case, such a method would presumably identify Lucas as the referent of 'Lucas'. In a similar way, and even though there may be space for some disagreement as to exactly what should count as the relevant descriptive condition(s), the Russellian lexicographer will treat Emma's false linguistic beliefs as providing the descriptive condition she associates with 'Lucas'. The person that these conditions apply to is Krugman and for this reason the Russellian dictionary will list Krugman as the referent of 'Lucas'. In this way the Kripkean dictionary will (mostly) track the conventional dictionary, while the Russellian dictionary will track the Emma dictionary.

The individuals identified by the descriptivist theory of reference will correspond to the content of a dictionary drawn up to reflect Emma's linguistic beliefs. In the same way, the results of the causal theory will (mostly) reflect the results of a dictionary drawn up to

reflect the actual conventional referents of the names that Emma uses. For this reason, I submit that traditional descriptivism is actually about (in my sense of 'about') our *beliefs* about the conventional reference of names, while Kripkean causalism is actually about the conventional reference of names. Call this the *dictionary* argument.

Four things should be noted about the above argument. Firstly, Kripke's theory will not give the exact results given in the Conventional dictionary. This is due to the 'reference-shift' cases originally pointed out by Evans (1982: 301). There have historically, most famously with the case of 'Madagascar', been cases where the referent of a name has shifted from the one it was given when the name was introduced. Note, however, that all causalists, including Kripke (1980: 163), have responded to such cases by accepting that the causal theory is incomplete and that the data that there are such reference-shifts should be accepted. Their inquiries treat the explanation of the data in the Conventional dictionary as the normative ideal that they are supposed to strive towards when constructing theories. Hence the fact that Kripkean causalism won't quite generate the Conventional dictionary is no objection to the claim that Kripkean causalism is an attempt to explain the content of the Conventional dictionary.

Secondly, note that something similar holds with regard to the relation between descriptivism and the Emma dictionary. I find it plausible that, if a specific theory, say that of Russell, failed to match the Emma dictionary in certain ways, the descriptivist would view this as a problem for Russell's views. Any difficulty in identifying the individual that a person thinks a name refers to must also crop up as a problem for a

descriptivist trying to determine the individual picked out in accordance with the descriptive condition governing a speaker's use of a name.

Thirdly, I wish to pre-empt any attacks based on the fact that Kripke's theory and traditional descriptivism are theories about the reference of names upon an occasion of use. This does not matter. We can imagine an extended version of the Conventional dictionary that captures the actual conventional referents of names as used by Emma over a period of time and an extended Emma dictionary that captures the supposed referents of names for the same speaker over the same period of time. The exact same reasoning would still apply.

Fourthly, the reader may well have noted that I have mostly avoided the terms 'semantic', 'semantic referent' or 'semantic content'. I have avoided the term 'semantic' precisely because I believe it to be a term of art that may have outlived its usefulness and serves to trick philosophers into thinking that a genuine question exists where no such question remains. I do not believe that there is a non-trivial question that traditional⁶ descriptivism and Kripkean causalism can be seen as rival answers to. We can reasonably inquire into how the conventional referent, the supposed referent and the speaker's referent are determined. These would be three conceptually distinct inquiries. There are also other concepts relevant to language that we can reasonably ask questions about. But there is

⁶ By 'traditional' descriptivism I mean the *internalist* theories of Russell, Frege and Kripke's (notorious) 'Frege-Russell'. I do not mean to imply that there is no possible dispute between, for instance, externalist versions of descriptivism and Kripkean causalism.

simply no legitimate question that is ‘semantic’ in the sense needed for Kripke and Russell to have a legitimate dispute. If the term ‘semantic referent’ is thought to mean something distinct from the three concepts developed here (or obvious extensions of them), it is simply a will o’ the wisp. Later on I will have a lot more to say in defense of this claim. For now, I will proceed by looking at the theoretical commitments of causalism and descriptivism, in order to show that they match those we would expect from a theory of conventional reference and supposed conventional reference respectively.

4. The argument from eccentricity and epistemic transparency

4.1 Descriptivism, eccentricity and epistemic transparency

In Russellian semantics (on the traditional interpretation) the meaning of the expressions used by a speaker is claimed to be perfectly reducible to objects (sense-data and universals) that we are acquainted with (1910: 108-110). Acquaintance is understood as a ‘direct cognitive relation’ that rules out the very possibility of a mistake. Thus semantics should fundamentally be understood in terms of entities that the subject has perfect and privileged access to. Fregean semantics is similar in this regard. What we would commonly describe as a situation where I use a word wrongly simply amounts to an idiosyncratic ‘idiolect’ in Fregean semantics (1948: 210). Both Russell and Frege are committed to the view that a subject *S* cannot be mistaken about the content of some

content-carrying entity employed by *S*, and that such content determines the real-world referent of the content-carrying entity (if any). Call this view *epistemic transparency*.

The matter of epistemic transparency is conceptually related to the matter of *eccentricity*, here defined as the view that the meaning of a name depends solely on facts about the mental state of the *user* of the name. In the case of both Russell and Frege it is the case that, if all the mental facts about an individual are given, then, however these mental facts are to be understood, the meaning of any uttered name is thereby fixed. One cannot plausibly be committed to epistemic transparency without also being committed to eccentricity, as the only plausible way to defend epistemic transparency about names would be to hold that the mental states of people are directly accessible to them. This presupposes that the meanings of names are eccentric, i.e. solely a matter of the mental states of individuals. I distinguish these issues, however, as, while epistemic transparency presupposes eccentricity, the reverse does not hold. One could claim that ‘the meanings of names’ are eccentric, but deny that we have direct access to the full content of our mental states. As epistemic transparency is the stronger commitment, I will state my argument in terms of it, and merely note how the considerations involved serve to explain the traditional descriptivists’ commitment to eccentricity.

The issue of epistemic transparency raises a puzzle. The public, conventional nature of proper names makes mistakes inevitable and their source easily understood. Yet both Russell and Frege think that a commitment to epistemic transparency is both necessary

and fundamental⁷. The question now arises: is this seeming difference between our commonsense understanding of linguistic conventions and the theories of Russell and Frege a difference on a matter of substance, or is the difference merely verbal? I think that it is absurd to view this difference as anything but verbal. This is not a terribly interesting thesis in itself, but I also think that this verbal dispute underlies much of 20th century semantics. I will start my argument by explaining exactly what the commitment to epistemic transparency that characterizes traditional descriptivism amounts to, before arguing that the difference in doctrine between traditional descriptivism and causalism concerning epistemic transparency is purely verbal.

4.2 Epistemic transparency does not imply referential infallibility

Note that the descriptivist commitment to epistemic transparency, expressed in terms of the theory of reference, does not mean that descriptivists claim that there is no sense in which a speaker can be wrong about the referent of a name. A speaker can still *apply* a name incorrectly. Imagine that Flintoff correctly believes that ‘Quine’ refers to the philosopher with the driest wit. If Flintoff sees Nadal standing in front of him and thinks that the person in front of him is the philosopher with the driest wit, and tries to refer to the person standing in front of him using ‘Quine’, the semantic descriptivist would claim that Flintoff has referred to Quine. Flintoff’s belief that he, in virtue of using ‘Quine’, has

⁷ I take it that this claim is uncontroversial. Boghossian (1994), for instance, also interprets Russell and Frege in a relevantly similar way. Kripke himself has recently (2008) argued that Frege is not only committed to epistemic transparency, but also to something akin to Russellian acquaintance.

referred to the man standing in front of him, is incorrect. This is because descriptivism, traditionally understood, does not claim that a speaker always succeeds in referring to what he wants to refer to, i.e. it does not claim that the speaker's referent and the semantic referent always coincide. Rather, it claims that a speaker cannot be wrong about *the conditions determining what a given name refers to*. According to descriptivism, as traditionally understood, Flintoff cannot believe that what is commonly referred to as the 'standing meaning' of a name like 'Quine' is 'the philosopher with the driest wit' and then have it turn out that this condition does not govern the reference of 'Quine'. This is where it appears to differ from our ordinary understanding of language. The commitment to epistemic transparency that characterises traditional descriptivism does allow for the *misapplication* of names due to some erroneous belief concerning a matter of substance (like: 'the man standing in front of me is the philosopher with the driest wit'), but does not allow for *purely linguistic mistakes*. Herein lies the sharp contrast between traditional descriptivism, as standardly interpreted, on the one hand, and our commonsense understanding of language - and Kripkean causalism - on the other hand. *Both* kinds of mistakes are allowed in our commonsense understanding of language and in Kripkean causalism. It is this contrast that I will claim to be purely verbal, as traditional descriptivism is not about the conventional reference of names, as Kripke's theory is, but about something else entirely.

4.3 Traditional descriptivism is about supposed reference, not conventional reference

Kripke explicitly states that his theory is about the reference of names in a public language (1977: 263, 273n), i.e. about what I have termed the conventional reference of names⁸, and is standardly interpreted as such. This accounts for his externalism. It is a mere truism, referred to earlier, that the conventional referent of a name is not fixed uniquely by each individual user of a name. Rather names are governed by communal conventions and the content of these conventions can be learned correctly or incorrectly. Hence the epistemic opacity of Kripke's theory is accounted for, as Kripkean causalism is a theory which claims that the conventional reference of public language names is fixed by historical chains of use.

However - and this is vital - these exact considerations make it absurd to claim that traditional descriptivism is about the same topic that Kripke's theory is about. The convention governing a name (whether upon an occasion of use or otherwise) is public, empirically discoverable and shared. It is the kind of thing we can be wrong about. We cannot seriously suppose that there is *any* sense in which traditional descriptivism denies these truisms. But, if we wish to portray traditional descriptivism as a rival to Kripke, we

⁸ Some have also interpreted Kripke as denying the possibility of a descriptivist theory of speaker's reference. Be that as it may, in this paper I will only focus on the main dispute in *Naming and Necessity*, namely the one concerning semantic reference. (Note that Kripke says explicitly (p. 25, footnote 3, reaffirmed in footnote 36, p.86) that his book is about semantic reference. In footnote 36 he also seems to explicitly deny that *Naming and Necessity* concerns speaker's reference.) I am not, of course, claiming that one could not extend Kripke's arguments in this way, or claiming that such a dispute would also be verbal.

have to portray traditional descriptivism as claiming that the conventional, publicly assigned referents of names are determined in terms of conditions that are individually idiosyncratic, epistemically transparent and infallibly tied to names. But this is to ascribe an absurd view to Russell and Frege and to suppose that they, inexplicably, missed the fact that the public usage of names is *taught*, and hence can be learned incorrectly, by individual speakers. And yet, on the traditional construal, we are forced to say that descriptivism, while it can account for the misapplication of names, as explained above, denies the very possibility of linguistic mistakes.

If a friend tells us that cars are green, leafy vegetables that are mostly available during the summer we will not credit him with a stupid theory of motor vehicles. Rather we will try and determine what he is really thinking about. In a similar way, we should not interpret the descriptivist claim that the condition governing the use of a name is infallibly known to the speaker as being a particularly stupid theory of those linguistic facts that we are typically taught when we first meet a stranger, e.g. that 'Quine' refers to Quine, etc. Rather, we should respond to such claims by trying to determine what Russell and Frege were really thinking about. What, then, could this be?

Some of our puzzlement vanishes if we view descriptivists as giving an account of the determination of the speaker's referent. The determination of the speaker's referent is exactly the kind of thing that many philosophers view as individually idiosyncratic, private, epistemically transparent and internalist. This was especially true at the time Russell and Frege were writing and fits with their views on related topics.

This, however, will not do. The conditions determining the speaker's referent when using a name may well be private, epistemically transparent and individually idiosyncratic. But it is too idiosyncratic. Such conditions differ for different speakers, which is consistent with what traditional descriptivists say about names, but they also differ wildly for one speaker from one occasion to the next, which is not. Of course, the traditional descriptivists, i.e. Russell, Frege and the developers of variants of their theories, are not quite in agreement on this issue. Both Russell and Frege are frequently portrayed as being committed to such stability in quick summaries of their work, but this does considerable violence to Russell's view (Russell, 1910: 115). Russell's actual view does not affect our argument though, and for this reason I will continue to speak of 'traditional descriptivism', so construed, for now. I will only discuss his actual view later on in this paper.

The view of the traditional descriptivists (or, at least, the view commonly ascribed to them) is that there is a *standing meaning* that is associated with a name. This standing meaning will tend to stay relatively constant and only change upon occasion, presumably when very important information concerning the referent of a name comes to light. Hence the content of traditional descriptivist theories of names makes it highly implausible that descriptivist theories of references are, in my sense of 'about', about the speaker's reference⁹.

⁹There is another reason why traditional descriptivism about reference cannot actually be about the speaker's reference. The referent identified by descriptivist theories need not be the speaker's referent, as was shown above in the case of Flintoff's use of 'Quine'.

We need to find some entity that can plausibly be construed as internalist and epistemically transparent, but that is also relatively stable across occasions of use. The *beliefs that a given speaker has concerning the conventional referent*, i.e. the determinants of the supposed referent of a name in the speaker's vocabulary, fit the bill perfectly. I will demonstrate by using an example that illustrates my tripartite distinction, but that does not depend on perceptual beliefs as the Quine/Ponting/Siddle example did.

Consider a conversation where someone (Hans) says that, no matter how much money you have, you will always be unsatisfied as someone else will have more. It is, of course, not true that, for any given person, there is someone who is richer. Gerald wishes to communicate this by pointing out that the world's richest man would disagree with what Hans said. Gerald mistakenly believes that the chairman of Berkshire Hathaway is the richest man in the world. Furthermore, suppose that Gerald believes that the chairman of Berkshire Hathaway is called 'Gates'. The convention that 'Gates' refers to Bill Gates is a public convention that can be taught, and learned, incorrectly, and Gerald was unlucky enough to somehow get this wrong. Gerald now says: "I think Gates would disagree".

In order to fully understand the above situation we need to know that Gerald was trying to say something about the world's richest man - currently the telecommunications entrepreneur Carlos Slim - and hence the speaker's referent of his utterance was Slim. We also need to know that 'Gates' actually refers to Gates, i.e. that Gates is the referent conventionally assigned to 'Gates'. We also need to know that Gerald has a false belief concerning the convention governing 'Gates' (as well as the false substantive belief that

the world's richest man is the chairman of Berkshire Hathaway) and that the person that he believes the name 'Gates' refers to is Buffett.

The notion of the speaker's referent captures the relation between Gerald's utterance of 'Gates' and Slim, while the notion of the conventional referent captures the relation between 'Gates' and Gates. In a similar way the notion of the supposed conventional referent captures the relation between Gerald's utterance of 'Gates' and Buffett. On the view defended, here Kripke's semantic theory is a theory of how it is that 'Gates' refers to Gates. Russell's theory is about the relation between 'Gates' and Buffett. That Russell's theory relates 'Gates' to Buffett is not a mistake, as was claimed, for relevantly similar cases, in *Naming and Necessity*. Rather, it is the correct result as Russell's theory concerns the supposed referent, and not the actual referent.

The notion of the supposed referent fits traditional descriptivism exactly. The determinants of the supposed conventional referents will differ across people as different people will have different, but mostly consistent, beliefs concerning the conventional referent of a name. This is due to the fact that different people will characterize their knowledge of the conventional referent of a name using different information. In this way, people who know someone from seeing them on a daily basis will probably use a visual stereotype to characterize their belief as to the referent of a name, people who have not seen a person will use other information concerning the person that they do have available, and famous people from long ago will typically have contemporary users characterize their beliefs concerning the referents of these people's names in terms of

their ‘famous deeds’. This is exactly the kind of thing that descriptivists claim for their *species* of meaning.

These determinants of the supposed referent will also be relatively stable across time, though not immutable. Over time our erroneous conventional beliefs can be corrected, we learn new and better criteria that identify certain individuals, and so on. This, once again, fits perfectly with what traditional, semantic descriptivism says about the conditions governing names. Furthermore, the determination of the supposed referent will be eccentric, i.e. will depend on the mental state of the utterer, just as the referent determined in terms of traditional descriptivism is supposed to depend on the mental state of the utterer.

Also note that, on the above view, we can make perfect sense of the descriptivist commitment to epistemic transparency. Our knowledge of the determinants of the supposed referent is exactly the kind of thing that descriptivists would construe as epistemically transparent. Simply put, I may be wrong about who ‘Quine’ actually refers to, but it can plausibly be maintained that I cannot be wrong about the criteria determining the individual that I *think* ‘Quine’ refers to. Hence the descriptivist commitment to epistemic transparency should be interpreted as being a claim about our *meta-linguistic* beliefs, i.e. our beliefs about what we believe names refer to.

On the standard interpretation of the debate we have to ascribe to descriptivists the dotty views that a speaker cannot be wrong about the conditions that actually govern the use of

a name, as well as the view that the conditions that govern the use of a name depend solely on facts about the individual user of a name. Such views are dotty as they amount to a denial that there is such a thing as a learned, public language. On the view I defend here, the true content of their position is much more plausible. The commitment to epistemic transparency only amounts to the claim that we have perfect access to our meta-linguistic beliefs. Such a view is not beyond argument - and is something anti-individualists regarding mental content would deny - but at least such a view is not obviously absurd and, furthermore, it sounds like exactly the kind of thing that Russell and Frege would affirm. Similarly, the commitment to *eccentricity* only amounts to the view that the content of a speaker's meta-linguistic beliefs depend on the mental state of the speaker. This is the merest truism, and may well be why neither Russell nor Frege spent any time arguing for this claim. Therefore I think that supposed reference is what Russell and Frege were actually talking 'about', even though they may not have understood their own doctrines in this way. An application of even the most conservative principle of charity forces us to conclude that their theories are not about what words mean, but about what people think words mean.

Note that, on this interpretation, the causal and descriptivist theories are consistent. It can reasonably be claimed that the conventional referent of a name is determined in virtue of a baptismal convention coupled with a causal chain of use and *also* that the linguistic beliefs of a speaker amount to a set of descriptive conditions that the individual believes are fulfilled by the individual who is the conventional referent of a name. Such a view is plainly not beyond argument, but at least it is coherent and not obviously wrong.

4.4 How Russell's actual view fits into this picture

In "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description" (1910:115), Russell notes that different people can abbreviate the same name by using different descriptive conditions. He says that, for a single utterer trying to talk about a single individual, these descriptions will vary over time (114) and that it is a matter of chance "which characteristics of a man's appearance will come into a friend's mind when he thinks of him" (114). Speaking of 'Bismarck', he says that "the description in our minds will probably be some more or less vague mass of historical knowledge – far more, in most cases, than is required to identify him" (115). Later on Russell implies that all the information I have at my disposal does not apply on a given occasion of use. When writing of 'Julius Caesar' he says that, on a given occasion of use, "in order to discover what is actually on my mind when I judge about Julius Caesar, we must substitute for the proper name a description made up of *some of the things* I know about him" (119, my italics).

What are we to make of this? In terms of my analysis, these Russellian views can easily be interpreted as being 'about' our linguistic beliefs. Such an interpretation would ascribe to Russell the view that there is never, or rarely, one consistently used descriptive condition that determines who I think a name refers to. Rather, what happens is that I wish to refer to someone, and, based on a piece of information already in my possession or subsequently acquired, I identify a name in my possession that I believe refers to this

person. Such information then plays the role of ‘linguistically relevant information’ in a specific context.

Taking an example, suppose I spot someone across the street who is walking oddly. Looking closely I see the facial features of the person, realize that it is Harry who is walking oddly, and say “Harry is limping”. In such a case the intended or speaker’s referent is whoever is walking oddly. Note that I saw that the person walking oddly has certain facial features, and that this is what guided my use of the name ‘Harry’. Hence it must be the case that I had the pre-existing, substantive belief that Harry has these facial features. This substantive belief guided my linguistic behaviour and hence the belief that whoever has those facial features is called ‘Harry’ can be ascribed to me. This is where the issue of epistemic transparency comes in, as I cannot be wrong in my meta-linguistic belief that I believe the person with such facial features to be called ‘Harry’. Hence, in my idiolect *at this given point in time*, ‘Harry’ is incontrovertibly tied to the condition ‘person with such and such facial features’.

This only makes Harry’s facial features the idiolectical meaning of Harry in this case though. Next time I may wish to refer to ‘the person I am hearing in the distance’, recognize Harry’s voice, and use my knowledge of what his voice sounds like to serve as the ‘idiolectical’ meaning. In other words my meta-linguistic belief concerning *this* use of ‘Harry’ is best expressed as saying that I believe ‘Harry’ to refer to ‘the person with such and such a voice’. In this way, any number of my substantive beliefs concerning Harry can play the role determining my linguistic beliefs on a specific occasion of use. The

condition determining the intended referent can also consist of a piece of information already known to me and hence it can, itself, serve as the linguistic content. In other words, I can intend to refer to my best friend and already know that Hogan is my best friend, and hence the content of ‘Hogan’ can be given by ‘my best friend’. But in such a case the intended referent and the supposed referent are still *conceptually* distinct. These two aspects are always distinct in principle and often distinct in practice.

Hence the specifics of Russell’s view, i.e. the detail beyond his commitment to epistemic transparency and eccentricity, make perfect sense when interpreted as being about our linguistic beliefs. In fact, it seems likely that the dispute between descriptivist theories that postulate a standing meaning and Russellian views should be understood as a dispute about how we should characterize a person’s beliefs concerning linguistic conventions.

5. The argument from idiolects

The last argument I wish to make is quite short and concerns the matter of ‘idiolects’. Traditional descriptivists are sometimes said to characterize language as a set of distinct, but overlapping ‘idiolects’. What would constitute the idiolect of an individual speaker? Given that it is uncontroversial that linguistic conventions exist, and given that a speaker must have a set of beliefs concerning these conventions, I see no candidate for the idiolect of an individual other than identifying this idiolect with *the set of beliefs that a speaker has regarding these public, linguistic conventions*. In talking of idiolects we are trying to capture a speaker’s ‘linguistic grasp’ of a situation. The most obvious way to

characterize a speaker's 'linguistic grasp' is to equate such a grasp with the set of beliefs that the speaker has concerning conventional, public rules. Hence, if traditional descriptivists were trying to characterize idiolects, and if idiolects are given by a subject's linguistic beliefs, then Frege¹⁰ and Russell were actually talking about (in my sense of 'about'), our linguistic beliefs. Note that the attempt to characterize our linguistic beliefs is useful work, as such characterisation of individual 'idiolects' (beliefs about linguistic conventions) is a vital part of the theory of communication. This is due to such linguistic beliefs being the explanatory link between the use of public language and the thoughts of individual speakers.

It has now been argued that every single interesting property of traditional descriptivism is true of, or would have been maintained by Russell and Frege to be true of, our linguistic beliefs about names. The same is true of Kripke and the conventional referent. Given these facts, I do not really see how the evidence in favour of believing that their theories are about distinct topics can really be stronger.

I see only one way of escaping the conclusion that, in my sense of 'about', Kripke and traditional descriptivists were not talking about the same topic. This would be to admit that traditional descriptivism cannot be about conventional reference, but then to also deny that Kripke's theory is about conventional reference and to claim that 'semantics' is

¹⁰ Frege's claim that senses are public does not contradict his view that people tend to have idiosyncratic idiolects. The first claim amounts to saying that grasping a thought is a matter of being in touch with a public, abstract, objectively existing entity. The latter claim is the denial that people typically grasp the *same* public thought when uttering the same sentence containing a name.

really about some *other topic* entirely. Such a dialectical move is misguided, as will be shown below.

6. What is ‘semantics’ supposed to be about?

6.1 An objection

A seemingly plausible objection can go as follows. Let us define the ‘semantic referent’ of a name as the individual that best explains our attribution of truth-conditions to an utterance in which the name occurs. This leads to a well-defined research program: determine what truth-conditions competent speakers attribute to utterances, and then construct a theory that explains such attributions. Using this definition, it is perfectly possible that we can discover that interpreters assign truth-conditions in one of at least three different ways.

We can discover - the objection continues - that interpreters assign truth-conditions to utterances in which names occur based on the causal chain of use relevant to the name, or based on the descriptive condition the utterer associates with the name, or, for that matter, based on what the utterer was trying to refer to when using the name. If we discovered such a thing it could show that, while people do use public conventions in order to communicate, these conventions *do not determine the semantic referent*, as defined above. Call a language where interpreters assign truth-conditions based on the descriptive condition the utterer attaches to the name *Russellian English*, call a language where

interpreters assign truth-conditions based on the causal chain from which the utterer inherited the name *Kripkean English*, and call a language where truth-conditions are assigned in terms of what the speaker - based on the conversational context – is trying to refer to *Donnellian English*. On this definition of ‘semantic reference’ it is clear that Russellian English, Kripkean English and Donnellian English are rival answers to an empirical question. We can give subjects cases like Ponting/Quine/Siddle or Slim/Gates/Buffett and try to determine whether English is Kripkean, Russellian or Donnellian.

6.2 Objection answered: the objector’s definition of ‘semantic’ cannot be used to ask a determinate question

I think the above objection captures how a majority of philosophers think of ‘semantic content’. It is assumed that interpreters assign truth-conditions to utterances and that we should try to develop theories that describe and explain these judgments. The problem with such a view lies in the very first stipulation made by the objector, namely ‘[l]et us define the ‘semantic referent’ of a term as the individual that best explains our attribution of truth-conditions to an utterance’. This does not amount to a well-formed definition with a determinate content of the required type. An interpreter can take us to be asking about the truth-conditions determined by what the speaker means, what the speaker believes the words mean, what the words actually mean, or some other related type of ‘meaning’. *But we already know the answer to the first three questions*, and the definition itself fails to identify a fourth question. We already know what the conventional,

supposed and intended referents are in cases like Gates/Buffer/Slim and Ponting/Quine/Siddle. We also know, as I have argued, that Russellian English can no more be a theory of what words mean than Kripkean English can be a theory of what speakers mean or what people think words mean. However, if we force the interpreter to answer without explicitly telling him what we are asking about, all we will learn from his answer is *how he interpreted our question*, and not any deep truths about ‘semantics’. This is analogous to the way in which, according to Kripke (1977), anyone who assigns Donnellan’s (1966) truth-conditions to a misdescription-case is only revealing that he took us to be asking about speaker meaning. Such data reveals linguistic ambiguity, not philosophical depth.

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 completely useless. 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. 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.

The question ‘How do you pronounce this word?’ can be interpreted as ‘How do you pronounce this English word?’, ‘How do you pronounce this Dutch word?’ or ‘How do you pronounce this German word?’. These are three independent questions with independent answers. If ‘How do you pronounce this word?’, as used here, is supposed to mean anything distinct from this it is simply meaningless, but deceptive, babble. Herein lies the analogy (and I think it is an exact analogy to what has actually happened in semantics). The ready availability of answers to the question ‘What are the truth-conditions of this utterance?’ only indicates that people take such a question to concern one of the notions discussed. But, just as there is no ‘real’ question as to the standard pronunciation of ‘meter’, so there is no question as to the ‘real’ truth-conditions. The question can, of course, be used to discover which one of the kinds of meaning someone took us to have meant by ‘meaning’ when we asked this question. But this trivial question is plainly not what has driven more than a century of semantic inquiry.

6.3 Other definitions of ‘semantic’ that suffer from essentially the same defect

In the objection above the objector tried to define the term ‘semantic referent’ with reference to the truth-conditions that competent speakers would attribute to utterances. The problem was that the ‘truth-conditions’ need to be truth conditions *of something*, i.e.

truth-conditions of the conventional meaning of the utterance, truth-conditions of the supposed linguistic meaning of the utterance, truth-conditions of the intended meaning of the utterance, or truth-conditions of some related type of ‘meaning’. The question itself, as asked by the objector, does not succeed in determining a *species* of meaning for us to have disputes about. There are a myriad of ways in which an objector can formulate his definition of ‘semantic’ that would run afoul of the exact same requirement. I cannot go through all superficially different attempts that I have encountered that suffer exactly the same defect, but will merely mention three.

The substantial difference between descriptivism and causalism is about how sentences manage to represent their intentional objects. Here we have the same problem again. The objector needs to specify whether he is talking about how sentences represent their conventionally assigned intentional objects, how sentences manage to communicate the intentional object that the speaker has in mind, how the sentence is related to the intentional object that the speaker believes the sentence to represent, or some related question. On the first three readings internalist descriptivism and externalist causalism cannot be rival theories of reference, and the formulation itself does not succeed in identifying a fourth option.

The substantial difference between descriptivism and causalism is about the appropriate input for a compositional semantic theory that attempts to explain communication. Again, the question to be asked is “Semantic theory *of what?*” We can have a theory of the conventional meaning of a sentence, the supposed meaning of a sentence and the

intended meaning of a sentence, and all of these are essential to explaining communication. On each of these readings internalist descriptivism and externalist causalism cannot be rival theories, and the formulation itself does not identify any fourth type of ‘content’.

The substantial difference between descriptivism and causalism is about what should or should not be values of names in a formal semantic theory. We can have a formal theory of the conventional meaning of sentences, a formal theory of the supposed (idiolectical) meaning of sentences, a formal theory of the primary (intended) meaning of sentences and a formal theory of other, related notions. Once again, this definition of ‘semantic’ is of no value until it has been specified what the formal theory in question is a formal theory about, whether it is one of the objects of my tripartite distinction or something else. On the first three readings, internalist descriptivism and externalist causalism cannot be plausible rival theories of reference and no fourth option has been identified.

In all of the above cases the problem is that the objector’s definition of ‘semantic’ (or ‘intentional object’, etc.) underdetermines what the topic of inquiry is supposed to be. Such objections suffer the same defect as the one discussed at length and are irrelevant. Also note that a need for a theory of the objects of my tripartite distinction, i.e. a theory of what words mean, what people mean and what people think words mean, arises naturally from any inquiry into communication and that what such inquiries are about could easily be explained to a ten-year old. This is in sharp contrast to the above, putative definitions of ‘semantic’. Their seeming sophistication only serves to conceal a lack of

conceptual depth, rigour and clarity. No doubt a hundred different semanticists can provide a hundred slightly different definitions of 'semantic', but I fail to see one that does not run into exactly the same difficulties.

7. Conclusion

It has been claimed that internalist descriptivism is absurd as a theory of conventional reference. In stark contrast to this, it can be shown that the data that descriptivist theories try to account for matches the data that an inquiry into the linguistic beliefs of a speaker would generate (the Dictionary argument) and that the theoretical commitments of traditional descriptivism matches what Russell and Frege would claim about the linguistic beliefs of a speaker (the Transparency and Eccentricity argument). From this it follows that Russell and Frege's views must stem from thinking about what we sometimes call the 'idiolects' of individual speakers. Such idiolects must (overwhelmingly) consist of a speaker's beliefs about the public conventions governing terms in a public language, and hence this is what their views must ultimately be 'about'.

Traditional descriptivism can no more be interpreted as a theory of the conventional referent than Kripke's views can be interpreted as a theory of the intended or supposed referent. This means that we can only save the idea that they somehow clash if we find another worthwhile topic concerning names for them to disagree on. The way

philosophers typically define ‘semantic’ falls a long way short of identifying such a topic and I fail to see a candidate that would fare any better¹¹.

The idea that there is a basic issue that Kripke and Russell disagree on, while seemingly compelling, is based on an illusion. If the reader doubts this claim, do try and improve upon the hypothetical objector in coming up with *a non-ambiguous question* to which Kripkean externalism and traditional descriptivism can plausibly be regarded as rival answers. It is my contention that this cannot be done. The basic issue that Kripke and Russell are supposed to disagree on does not exist.

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¹¹ My own suspicion as to how this confusion arose is that it is due to the several *species* of ‘meaning’ that we have an intuitive grasp of and that are relevant to explaining communication. When we read Russell and Frege, we automatically interpret their claims as being about a speaker’s linguistic beliefs, without recognizing it in these terms. When we read Kripke we, based on what he explicitly says and the truth-values he ascribes to his example-cases, similarly immediately interpret his claims as being about conventional reference, again without recognizing this in these terms. When we *then* look back at traditional descriptivism, interpreting it as being about conventionally determined reference, we are forced to conclude that it is badly wrong.

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