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Reference and Causal Chains

Andrea Bianchi

Abstract: Around 1970, both Keith Donnellan and Saul Kripke produced powerful arguments against description theories of proper names. They also offered sketches of positive accounts of proper name reference, highlighting the crucial role played by historical facts that might be unknown to the speaker. Building on these sketches, in the following years Michael Devitt elaborated his well-known *causal theory* of proper names. As I have argued elsewhere, however, contrary to what is commonly assumed, Donnellan’s and Kripke’s sketches point in two rather different directions, by appealing to historical or causal facts of different sorts. In this paper, I shall discuss and criticize Devitt’s causal theory, which confuses things, I shall argue, by mixing, so to speak, Donnellan’s and Kripke’s sketches.

Keywords: proper names, causal theory of proper names, reference, causal chains, speaker’s reference, semantic reference, Michael Devitt, Keith Donnellan, Saul Kripke.

Affiliation: Dipartimento di Discipline Umanistiche, Sociali e delle Imprese Culturali, Università di Parma, Plesso di via D’Azeglio, 43125 Parma, Italy.

As any reader knows and this volume witnesses, Michael Devitt made outstanding contributions to Twentieth and Twenty-first century philosophy in many different fields, from philosophy of language to metaphysics, and from epistemology to metaphilosophy and philosophy of science (especially philosophy of biology and philosophy of linguistics). But if they had to pick out one single contribution of his, I am certain that most philosophers would indicate his *causal theory of proper names*.

Actually, Devitt worked on the elaboration and refinements of his causal theory during his entire career as a philosopher, from its earliest stages to very recent times. Indeed, this was the subject of his 1972 Ph.D. dissertation at Harvard University, *The Semantics of Proper Names: A Causal Theory*, his first article, “Singular Terms,” published by the *Journal of Philosophy* in 1974, his first book, *Designation*, published in 1981, and dozens of further publications since then, among which an important recent one is the article “Should Proper Names Still Seem So Problematic?” (2015).

At the origin of all this there is, as Devitt recalls in the preface to *Designation*, a series of lectures given by Saul Kripke at Harvard in 1967, which Devitt had the chance to attend and which anticipated many of the themes later developed in *Naming and Necessity*. Devitt was quick in realizing how disruptive the content of those lectures was. Moreover, unlike many of those who first reacted to Kripke’s work, he was not overimpressed by modal issues. Unlike all those who wrongly took Kripke’s fundamental claim about proper names to be that they are *rigid designators*, Devitt immediately understood that the notion of rigid designation, as characterized in Lecture I of *Naming and Necessity*, was nothing but a useful instrument for arguing against what Kripke called the “description theory of proper names.” But Devitt saw clearly that, first, much more powerful arguments against it – the *argument from ignorance* and the *argument from error* – are offered in Lecture II;[[1]](#footnote-1) and, second, that what was really revolutionary in Kripke’s work was his positive answer to the question concerning *reference determination* – the *chain of communication picture* sketched in the final part of Lecture II. As Devitt wrote at the very beginning of his first article, “[t]he main problem in giving the semantics of proper names is that of explaining the nature of the link between name and object in virtue of which the former designates the latter” (1974: 183; see also 1976: 406 and 1981a: 6). And Kripke had not only shown that the description theory is “mistaken not merely in details but in fundamentals” (1974: 183) but also “indicated where the truth of the matter lies, namely in a ‘causal theory’ of proper names” (183-184).

Here is the famous passage where Kripke introduced the key idea:

Someone, let’s say, a baby, is born; his parents call him by a certain name. They talk about him to their friends. Other people meet him. Through various sorts of talk the name is spread from link to link as if by a chain. A speaker who is on the far end of this chain, who has heard about, say Richard Feynman, in the market place or elsewhere, may be referring to Richard Feynman even though he can’t remember from whom he first heard of Feynman or from whom he ever heard of Feynman. He knows that Feynman was a famous physicist. A certain passage of communication reaching ultimately to the man himself does reach the speaker. He then is referring to Feynman even though he can’t identify him uniquely. He doesn’t know what a Feynman diagram is, he doesn’t know what the Feynman theory of pair production and annihilation is. Not only that: he’d have trouble distinguishing between Gell-Mann and Feynman. So he doesn’t have to know these things, but, instead, a chain of communication going back to Feynman himself has been established, by virtue of his membership in a community which passed the name on from link to link, not by a ceremony that he makes in private in his study: ‘By “Feynman” I shall mean the man who did such and such and such and such’. (Kripke 1972: 298-299 (1980: 91-92))

Unfortunately, however, Kripke did not develop the idea to produce a full-blown theory, but limited himself to some sketchy remarks, offering a rough picture, “a picture which,” as he himself said, “if more details were to be filled in, might be refined so as to give more exact conditions for reference to take place” (Kripke 1972: 300-301 (1980: 94)).[[2]](#footnote-2) Since, however, “Kripke 1972 leaves a great deal of work to be done on the theory but it establishes the theory’s plausibility adequately enough to justify this investigation” (Devitt 1976: 417 n. 2), Devitt himself sat down to fill in the details. The result, of course, is his own causal theory.

To introduce the theory and explain its origin, Devitt writes the following in the preface of *Designation*:

There are two steps in my causal theory of proper names: a causal theory of *reference borrowing* and a causal theory of *grounding*. The theory of reference borrowing explains how those of us who have never grounded a name in its bearer can get the benefit of the groundings of others. The theory of grounding explains how, ultimately, names are linked to their objects. In 1967 I attended a series of lectures by Kripke at Harvard, parts of which later became the paper “Naming and Necessity” (1972). From those lectures I took the idea of a causal theory of reference borrowing. (Devitt 1981a: x)

And, significantly for what I want to say in this paper, he immediately adds, “Donnellan has a similar idea,” mentioning Keith Donnellan’s two seminal papers on proper names, “Proper Names and Identifying Descriptions” (1970) and “Speaking of Nothing” (1974).

I shall come back to this in a moment. Before doing so, however, let me say that I am truly sympathetic to the spirit of Devitt’s proposal. He must be given credit for having clearly identified the central questions reference theorists should try to answer – *rigidity*, for example, is only a distraction – and where they should seek an answer; and for having looked at all this from a *naturalistic* perspective, a perspective that one does not find in either Kripke or Donnellan. The result of all this was genuine progress in philosophy of language: we now better understand the relation between language and reality.

Having said this, however, I shall devote the rest of my paper to expressing and motivating my dissatisfaction at how Devitt has filled in some of the details. In doing so, I shall claim, he lost track of what I take to be a basic – perhaps *the* basic – insight of Kripke’s.

Before proceeding, though, let me make some further preliminary remarks to avoid misunderstanding. First, Devitt’s causal theory is meant to cover not only proper names but also referentially used definite descriptions, demonstratives, and natural kind terms. On the one hand, I believe that a causal theory can be extended even further, to cover common nouns other than natural kind terms (e.g., artifactual kind terms), and possibly adjectives and verbs as well. On the other hand, I am skeptical about Devitt’s extension of it to compound expressions such as definite descriptions. My only focus in this paper, however, will be proper names: I shall express and motivate my dissatisfaction at how Devitt has filled in some of the details in order to transform Kripke’s chain of communication picture of *proper names* into a causal theory of *proper names*. Second, Devitt’s chosen word for the causal relationship connecting a term and an object is “*designation*,” whereas he uses “reference” as an umbrella term for both designation and the non-causal relation he calls “denotation.” Accordingly, in his terminology both the name “Michael Devitt” and the attributive description “the philosopher celebrated in this volume” refer to him, but only the name designates him. Instead, as is now more common, in what follows I shall use “reference” only for the causal relationship. Accordingly, I say that the name “Michael Devitt,” but not the attributive description “the philosopher celebrated in this volume,” refers to Devitt.

Well, then. Let us grant that reference is a causal relationship. More specifically, a proper name token refers to an object that is at the origin of a certain *causal chain*. But *which* causal relationship is reference? More specifically, *which* causal chain has the referent of the proper name token at its origin? In fact, a proper name token bears (different) causal relationships to many different objects; as a consequence, it is at the end of many different causal chains, at whose origins there are many different objects.[[3]](#footnote-3) Think, for example, of the causal relationship between a proper name token and the person who produced it – the speaker: obviously we do not want to say that a proper name token refers to the person who produced it only because this person is at the origin of a particular causal chain ending in the token – if I utter the name “Michael Devitt,” I am at the origin of a causal chain ending in the token, but the token does not refer to me. More to the point, think of Kripke’s Smith-Jones case:[[4]](#footnote-4) there, the token of the name “Jones” is causally related both to Jones, *via* a causal chain that goes back to a baptism or something like that, and to Smith, because the production of the token was prompted by the speaker’s seeing him raking the leaves. Who, then, does the token refer to, Jones or Smith?[[5]](#footnote-5) To deal with this and other cases, we certainly need to say more about the causal relationships and causal chains involved in reference.

Having said this, however, our ‘causal’ questions (*Which* causal relationship is reference? *Which* causal chain has the referent of the proper name token at its origin?) might seem not to raise difficult problems. Didn’t those who inspired Devitt’s causal theory, Kripke and Donnellan, give clear answers – Kripke even called the relevant causal chain a “chain of communication” – so that the remaining task is only the tedious one of filling in all the details? Not so, I claim. The fact is that Kripke and Donnellan, contrary to what Devitt seemed to think at the time he wrote “Singular Terms” and *Designation*, gave *very different* answers to our questions. Or so I argued in a long paper that some years ago I wrote together with Alessandro Bonanini, devoted to reconstructing Donnellan’s “historical explanation theory” of proper names as it emerges in the two papers Devitt himself mentions in the preface of *Designation* and to contrast it with Kripke’s chain of communication picture.

Undoubtedly, Kripke and Donnellan were fighting against the same enemies, so to speak – Donnellan’s attack on what he calls the “principle of identifying descriptions” converges with that of Kripke’s on the “description theory.” And some of Donnellan’s arguments parallel Kripke’s most powerful ones, those from ignorance and from error.[[6]](#footnote-6) Moreover, on the positive side, they both took *causal reality* (or, as Donnellan preferred to say, *history*) to be the key to proper name reference. Nonetheless, they looked at causal realities (histories) of different sorts, so to speak. As we know, Kripke insisted on the causal relationship a given proper name token bears to preceding tokens of the same name (the chain of communication). Donnellan, instead, placed the explanatory burden on the mind of the speaker: what determines the reference of a proper name token is the cognitive status of the person who produced it. Indeed, Bonanini and I summarized Donnellan’s account in the following way: “A token of a proper name N produced by a speaker S at the time T refers to an individual X if and only if S’s having X in mind is appropriately involved in the explanation of S’s production of the token” (Bianchi and Bonanini 2015: 188 n. 27).[[7]](#footnote-7) Note that in this account neither preceding tokens of the name N nor a baptism are mentioned at all. I shall not spend much time on this here, but an interesting way to highlight the difference between Kripke’s and Donnellan’s accounts is in terms of reference borrowing. In fact, while reference borrowing is obviously fundamental for Kripke, there is no place for this alleged phenomenon in Donnellan’s account. If Donnellan’s historical explanation theory is true, in fact, when we use a proper name we simply do not borrow reference. On the contrary, we always *fix* it *anew*. We can have an object in mind in various ways – for example, because someone talked to us about it (in this sense, there can be something like a having-in-mind borrowing) – but, once we have that object in mind, we can refer to it by whatever name we want: the token we produce refers to the object we have in mind, no matter how that object was baptised and what any preceding tokens of the same name referred to.

Summing up, contrary to what Devitt seemed to think at the time when he first elaborated his causal theory, it seems indisputable that Kripke and Donnellan had different views on proper name reference – they gave different answers to our ‘causal’ questions. Although both Kripke’s and Donnellan’s answers ‘converge’ on the same referent in the vast majority of cases – they both account for Devitt’s being the referent of all the tokens I produced in writing this paper of the name “(Michael) Devitt” (but note that the description theory would also account for this) – they appeal to different sets of considerations. And in certain cases, for example Kripke’s Smith-Jones case, Donnellan’s “Aston-Martin” case, and, possibly, Gareth Evans’ “Madagascar” case, they even diverge as to what or whom the referent of a proper name token is.[[8]](#footnote-8)

As of recently, under the influence of Joseph Almog, various philosophers, related in one way or another with UCLA, where Donnellan taught for many years, have rediscovered and developed Donnellan’s answers, determining something like a Donnellan *Renaissance* in the theory of reference.[[9]](#footnote-9) Here is, for example, what Almog writes:

Donnellan’s idea … *unifies* the cases of proper names, demonstrative [*sic*] and definite descriptions. What is at stake for Donnellan is not so much the morphology of the specific expression used but the underlying cognitive relation between the cognizer and the cognized object. In the party, I have in mind a given object, Sir Alfred, before any linguistic activity. I can now use a whole spectrum of expressions to get at what I am *already* cognitively bound to. I may say “he”; I may say “she” (if Sir Alfred is in female attire); I may say “Sir Alfred,” using his correct name, or “George,” using a false name some prankster tossed to me while earlier pointing out to me Sir Alfred; and I may use a whole variety of descriptions, for example “the theologian speaking loudly about his Catholic faith,” or “an eloquent but slightly tipsy theologian standing to the right of Margaret,” even if Sir Alfred is no theologian, et cetera. Through and through, the one underlying fact is that I am wired to this man by an information link *from* him *to* me – to my cognitive system – and the expression(s) I am about to use *ride back* on that wire, externalizing the cognitive contact already made. (Almog 2012: 181)

Now, let us ask where Devitt stands concerning this. We said that he filled in the details needed to transform a causal picture into a causal theory. But *which* causal picture did Devitt transform into a theory, Kripke’s or Donnellan’s? In other words, what are Devitt’s answers to our two questions? My dissatisfaction with Devitt’s way of filling in the details is due to the fact that it does not make it that clear what his answers are. Or, rather, that it confuses things, by mixing, so to speak, Donnellan’s and Kripke’s answers.

Why am I saying this? Up to now, I have only mentioned a passage from the preface to *Designation* where Devitt assimilates Kripke’s and Donnellan’s ideas. But this might only indicate that he was mistaken about the content of Donnellan’s proposal.[[10]](#footnote-10) In fact, in his formative years Devitt was exposed to Kripke’s research much more than to Donnellan’s. Thus, it is natural to think that when he started to work autonomously on these issues he decided to develop Kripke’s answers – the chain of communication picture – into a causal theory, and that he mistakenly thought that Donnellan’s answers were similar if not identical. The fact that an alleged cornerstone of Devitt’s causal theory is the notion of reference borrowing, which clearly sits well with Kripke’s picture, gives further support to this. What’s more, here is what Devitt writes in the first section of his 1974 article:

The central idea of the causal theory of proper names is that our present uses of a name, say ‘Aristotle’, designate the famous Greek philosopher Aristotle, *not* in virtue of the various things we (rightly) believe true of him, but in virtue of *a causal network stretching back from our uses to the first uses of the name to designate Aristotle*. Our present uses of a name *borrow their reference* from earlier uses. It is this social mechanism that enables us all to designate the same thing by a name.

This central idea makes our present uses of a name causally dependent on earlier uses of it. (Devitt 1974: 184; see also 1976: 409, 1981a: 25, and 2015: 110)

This is, of course, the idea backing Kripke’s chain of communication picture, and I am more than ready to subscribe to it. Indeed, the appeal to a social mechanism of this sort seems to me a – possibly *the* – basic insight of Kripke’s on proper name reference. Unfortunately, however, no more mention of this or other *social* mechanisms occurs in Devitt’s article. Instead, in the fourth section a different notion is called upon to develop his causal theory. Quite surprisingly, Devitt writes, only a few pages after the above passage, the following: “Which object does a name designate? It is natural to say that it designates the object the speaker *had in mind* or *meant*” (1974: 188; see also 1976: 406 and 1981a: 32). Indeed, “[w]e can say roughly … that a name token designates an object if and only if the speaker had the object in mind (meant the object) in uttering the token” (1974: 189). This is, according to Devitt, “an insight of description-theorists” (1976: 406; see also 1974: 188 and 1981a: 32) that should be kept even after Kripke’s “decisive refutation of description-theories” (1976: 407) of proper names. Where description-theorists went wrong is in their understanding of having-in-mind in terms of (identifying) *knowledge*. On the contrary, we must understand it in *causal* terms. Indeed, Devitt claims that “one has an object in mind in virtue of a causal connection between one’s state of mind and the object” (1974: 188; see also 1976: 409-410 and 1981a: 33), and he adds that “[o]ne can ‘borrow’ the ability to have something in mind” (1974: 191), because “[t]here can be a causal link of the required kind even though the speaker has had no direct experience of the object: it will be a causal connection running *through others* back to speakers who did experience the object” (*ibid*.; see also 1981a: 38). In fact, Devitt goes as far as to offer a “rough” causal “analysis of *having an object in mind in using a name (meaning an object by a name)*” (1974: 189; see also 1976: 410).

Now, this is almost exactly the view that, according to Bonanini’s and my reconstruction, Donnellan had. Note, for example, how similar the following passage, concerning the first use of a name “acquired not at a naming ceremony but *through use*” (1974: 199) is to the one by Almog quoted above:

In virtue of what does such a first use designate the object? Our answer is along familiar lines. The speaker had the object in mind. He had it in mind in virtue of a causal connection. This connection *might have* led him to use a certain description *had he been searching for a description to designate it*, or a certain demonstrative *had he been searching for a demonstrative,* but *did* lead him to use a certain name *when he was searching for an apt name for it*. Part of what he intended was to bestow the name (provisionally, perhaps) on the object. (Devitt 1974: 199; 1981a: 58-59)

And, emphatically, this is *not* the view that Kripke had. In fact, there is no mention at all of having-in-mind, or related cognitive states or events, in the second lecture of *Naming and Necessity*. All that Kripke writes there is *compatible* with the claim that a proper name token can refer to an object the speaker does not have in mind. I am not saying that Kripke believes this can indeed be the case, and, as for myself, I believe that, under a certain construal of the notion of having in mind, this cannot be the case: we always have in mind what the proper name token we produce refers to. But, certainly, having in mind does not play any deep explanatory role in Kripke’s chain of communication picture. Thus, is it really this picture that Devitt developed into a full-blown causal theory?

It might be objected that Devitt has always made it clear that the appeal to having in mind is only an “intuitively appealing start” (2015: 111) for, or a “stepping stone” (1974: 202) to, his causal theory.[[11]](#footnote-11) In fact, he may rightly claim that he has offered what, in his 1974 and 1976 articles, he called an “analysis,” and later on an “explanation” (1981a: 33, 225), or, “better, an explication” (2015: 111) of having in mind and that the final, ‘official’, formulation of his causal theory does not mention having in mind at all: “the notion does not feature in the theory” (1981a: 138). However, while this is true, it seems to me to be beside the point. The fact remains that his explanation of proper name reference, like Donnellan’s, is given in terms of the *mental* or *cognitive* state of the speaker. In a nutshell, according to Devitt a proper name token refers to whatever the thought that immediately caused the production of it is about, where the explanation of the thought’s aboutness is also given in causal terms. This gives us Devitt’s answers to our two ‘causal’ questions. But these answers are Donnellan’s answers, *not* Kripke’s answers. Indeed, even Devitt’s causal explanation of a thought’s aboutness is remindful of the one offered by Donnellan and elaborated by the neo-Donnellanians.[[12]](#footnote-12) In a footnote of his 2015 article, Devitt shows some awareness of this:

In a highly UCLA-centric recent volume in honor of Donnellan, called “*Having in Mind*” …, Joseph Almog proposes a causal explanation of having in mind (2012: 177, 180-2) that has similarities to my old explanation, as Bianchi indicates (2012: 89 n. 7). Almog attributes the explanation to Donnellan…. Donnellan’s talk of “having in mind” is … a “metaphor” that needs development …. One might well think that a causal explanation is the natural development. It certainly seemed so to me and that was why I made it. Having made it, however, we should see this folk talk of “having in mind” as but “a stepping stone” to a causal theory of designation. (Devitt 2015: 111 n. 4)

Given all this, it seems fair to me to conclude that Devitt’s causal theory shouldn’t be seen as a development of Kripke’s chain of communication picture. It should, rather, be considered as a development of the alternative causal picture offered by Donnellan, Donnellan’s historical explanation theory.

There is, however, an important complication that we need to discuss. In *Designation*, in fact, Devitt introduces in his theory the distinction between *speaker’s reference* and *semantic reference* (in his terminology, *speaker-designation* and *conventional-designation*). And his final, ‘official’, formulation of the theory contains two separate clauses for speaker’s reference and semantic reference. Now, certainly this move was not inspired by Donnellan, as Donnellan did not make any such distinction, and his historical explanation theory is meant to be a theory of the only kind of reference he was ready to recognize. What’s more, the distinction was famously used by Kripke to argue against Donnellan, and almost certainly Devitt took it from Kripke’s 1977 article. Shouldn’t we reconsider, then, the conclusion I drew a moment ago? Not so, I claim.

It must be admitted that Devitt’s acknowledging a distinction between speaker’s reference and semantic reference allows him to avoid some of the extreme consequences that can be drawn from Donnellan’s account, for example that, at least from a semantic point of view, there are no *languages*.[[13]](#footnote-13) But this does not make Devitt’s theory anymore Kripkean, or so it seems to me.

First, consider Devitt’s final, ‘official’, formulation of his theory of speaker’s reference: “*Speaker-Designation*: A designational name token speaker-designates an object if and only if all the designating-chains underlying the token are grounded in the object” (Devitt 2015: 125). The formulation is rather technical, but if we look at how the technical terms are introduced by Devitt, we soon realize that the explanation of speaker’s reference is very similar to Donnellan’s explanation of reference. Designating chains are introduced by Devitt in *Designation* in this way:

“underlying” a name token is a “causal chain” “accessible to” the person who produced the token. That chain, like the ability that partly constitutes it, is “grounded in” the object the name designates…. I shall call such a causal chain a … “designating-chain.” (Devitt 1981a: 29)

And they are thus characterized: “D[esignating]-chains consist of three different kinds of link: groundings which link the chain to an object, abilities to designate, and communication situations in which abilities are passed on or reinforced (reference borrowings)” (Devitt 1981a: 64; 2015: 110). Here, it is important not to be misled by the word “designating” in “designating-chains.” In fact, designating-chains underlying a proper name token do not necessarily originate in a baptism or something like that. For example, in the Smith-Jones case already mentioned (see note 4), there is, according to Devitt, a designating-chain underlying the “Jones” tokens produced in that particular situation by the two speakers originating in their perception of Smith (although there is another one originating in Jones’ baptism).[[14]](#footnote-14) But, then, Devitt’s ‘official’ formulation of his causal theory of speaker’s reference does not differ much from his 1974 account of reference discussed above, as also the following comment to an example in his 2015 article shows: “The token designated that person in virtue of being immediately caused by a thought that is grounded in that person by a designating-chain” (Devitt 2015: 111). And we have already seen that this provides an articulation of Donnellan’s answers to our two causal questions. In fact, Devitt’s causal theory of speaker’s reference has one of the extreme consequences of Donnellan’s historical explanation theory: once we have a thought about an object, we can express the former and (speaker-)refer to the latter by whatever name we want. The token we then produce (speaker)-refers to the object the thought is about, no matter how that object was baptised and what any preceding tokens of the same name referred to:

A person can, of course, speaker-designate an object by a name without there being any convention of so doing. All that is required is that a token of the name have underlying it a designating-chain grounded in the object. So I could now speaker-designate Aristotle with any old name simply on the strength of the link to Aristotle that is constitutive of my ability to designate him by ‘Aristotle.’ (Devitt 2015: 120)

Second, consider Devitt’s final, ‘official’, formulation of his theory of semantic reference: “*Conventional-Designation*: A designational name token conventionally designates an object if and only if the speaker, in producing the token, is participating in a convention of speaker-designating that object, and no other object, with name tokens of that type” (Devitt 2015: 126). Although certainly non-Donnellanian, this theory does not appear to be Kripkean, either. Or, at least, it does not resemble Kripke’s chain of communication picture – it does not appeal to any chain of tokens or uses of proper names. Perhaps, if *participating in a convention* can be explained in causal terms, as Devitt claims it can, the theory is still causal, but it does not seem to me to provide anything like Kripke’s answer to our first causal question (*Which* causal relationship is reference?). Insofar as some causal chains are appealed to in it, they are those by which speaker’s reference is accounted for, which, as I argued, are remindful of Donnellan’s rather than of Kripke’s.

In fact, a striking aspect of Devitt’s theory of semantic reference is that it explains it in terms of speaker’s reference. This should immediately remind us of Grice’s general project of grounding *sentence* or *word meaning* on *utterer’s meaning*: “The meaning (in general) of a sign needs to be explained in terms of what users of the sign do (or should) mean by it on particular occasions” (Grice 1957: 217). Indeed, Devitt may be seen – and I believe he would agree on this – as pursuing Grice’s project,[[15]](#footnote-15) although certainly he does not want to take the further step of explaining utterer’s meaning (speaker’s reference) in terms of communicative (referring) *intentions*.

Now, doesn’t Kripke’s appeal to the distinction between speaker’s reference and semantic reference show that he too was pursuing, or at least endorsing, Grice’s general project? If this were so, then at least in this respect Devitt’s theory could be seen as a development of Kripke’s ideas on reference. But, unfortunately, this is not so.

In his 1977 article, after presenting the already mentioned Smith-Jones case, Kripke asks how can we account for it. Here is his answer:

Suppose a speaker takes it that a certain object *a* fulfills the conditions for being the semantic referent of a designator, “*d*.” Then, wishing to say something about *a*, he uses “*d*” to speak about *a*; say, he says “*φ(d)*.” Then, he said, of *a*, on that occasion, that it *φ*’d; in the appropriate Gricean sense ..., he *meant* that *a φ*’d. This is true even if *a* is not really the semantic referent of “d.” If it is not, then *that a φ’s* is included in what he meant (on that occasion), but not in the meaning of his words (on that occasion). (Kripke 1977: 263-264)

From this, Kripke arrives at his characterization of speaker’s reference:

we may tentatively define the speaker’s referent of a designator to be that object which the speaker wishes to talk about, on a given occasion, and believes fulfills the conditions for being the semantic referent of the designator. He uses the designator with the intention of making an assertion about the object in question (which may not really be the semantic referent, if the speaker’s belief that it fulfills the appropriate semantic conditions is in error). The speaker’s referent is the thing the speaker referred to by the designator, though it may not be the referent of the designator, in his idiolect. (Kripke 1977: 264)

So, it seems that according to Kripke, for there to be speaker’s reference, there has to be, (1), a speaker’s use of a designator to assert something (but, I assume, any other illocutionary act would do as well), backed by, (2), his or her wish to talk about a particular object, and, (3), his or her belief about that particular object that it is the semantic referent of the designator. More precisely, *a* speaker-refers to an individual *b* by using a designator *c* if and only if, (1), *a* wishes to talk about *b*, and, (2), *a* believes of *b* that it is the semantic referent of *c*, and, (3), *a* produces a token of *c* in the course of accomplishing an illocutionary act.

From this, it should immediately be clear that according to Kripke speaker’s reference cannot be used to account for semantic reference. According to his definition, in fact, one cannot speaker-refer to *b* by using *c* if he or she does not believe of *b* that it is the semantic referent of *c*, namely if he or she does not have the concept of semantic reference. But, then, speaker’s reference obviously presupposes semantic reference: the second clause in Kripke’s definition rules out the possibility of explaining the latter notion in terms of the former.

May Kripke’s notion of speaker’s reference play some other significant explanatory role? Surely, what one speaker-refers to on a given occasion has some bearing on how he or she acts in the situation he or she is in. So, the notion might help to account for speaker’s behavior. In fact, it is at least arguable that what explains people’s behavior is their beliefs and desires (see e.g. Fodor 1987: ch. 1), and Kripke’s notion of speaker’s reference is couched in terms of beliefs and desires (“wishes”). There is no doubt that the beliefs and desires involved in *a*’s speaker-referring to *b* explain part of *a*’s behavior (especially, *a*’s behavior concerning *b*). For this reason, the notion may certainly play some explanatory role in *psychology*. However, this role is simply inherited from the notions by which it has been defined. So, no deep theoretical gain seems to have been achieved by introducing the notion.

Does this mean that Kripke’s distinction is of no use, contrary to what Devitt, as well as many other philosophers of language, thinks? I do not believe so. But I believe, and I believe Kripke believes, that its use is mainly negative. It may dialectically help to convince people that we do not have to posit unexpected semantic relations (“ambiguities”) to explain some intuitions we may have. Indeed, by using some expressions sometimes we may want to refer to things which those expressions do not semantically refer to. (A case in point could be, of course, that of referentially used definite descriptions.)

Obviously, none of this shows that Grice’s project cannot be pursued in the case of proper names. Unlike Kripke’s, Devitt’s Donnellanian explanation of speaker’s reference does not appeal to semantic reference, hence there is no problem in using *his* notion of speaker’s reference to account for semantic reference. But this shows, once again, how different Devitt’s and Kripke’s ideas on reference are.

Note, also, that in Kripke’s definition of speaker’s reference there is no mention of causal chains: causal chains – chains of communication – are used by him to account for semantic reference. Therefore, Kripke’s chain of communication picture and Devitt’s causal theory not only appeal to different types of causal chains (chains of communication vs. Donnellanian chains), but make them play a different role. In Kripke’s picture, chains of communication explain semantic reference, by which speaker’s reference is explained in terms of certain propositional attitudes related to it held by the speaker. In Devitt’s theory, on the contrary, Donnellanian chains explain speaker’s reference, by which semantic reference is explained in terms of certain conventions related to it. Again, Devitt’s theory does not appear to be a development of Kripke’s picture.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Let me conclude. In his “Afterthoughts,” David Kaplan introduced what I take to be an important distinction, the one between *subjectivist* and *consumerist semantics*. In Kaplan’s opinion, traditional semantics, such as Gottlob Frege’s and Bertrand Russell’s, are subjectivist: they are characterized by the thesis that “[w]hen we speak, we *assign* meanings to our words,” since “the words themselves do not *have* meanings” (Kaplan 1989: 600). Hence, according to them, “like Humpty Dumpty, everyone runs their own language” (*ibid*.). For example, in order to refer to, say, Aristotle, speakers must attach a meaning somehow available to them to the expression they use (a proper name like “Aristotle,” for example). If they are not able to do so, they will not be able to refer to him.

To subjectivist semantics, Kaplan opposes the view that “we are, for the most part, language *consumers*” (602). According to consumerist semantics, in fact, “[w]ords come to us prepackaged with a semantic value.” Hence, “[i]f we are to use *those words*, the words we have received, the words of our linguistic community, then we must defer to *their* meaning” (*ibid*.). In order to refer to Aristotle, for example, speakers only have to use an expression whose meaning allows them to do this (a proper name like “Aristotle,” for example): when they acquired the expression, by hearing or reading it, they acquired a means to refer to him.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Now, Kaplan sensibly claims that consumerist semantics goes hand in hand with Kripke’s “historical chain picture of the reference of names,” as the latter offers “an alternative explanation of how a name in local use can be connected with a remote referent, an explanation that does not require that the mechanism of reference is already in the head of the local user” (Kaplan 1989: 602-603). Indeed, if this picture is correct, in most of our name uses we consume, in Kaplan’s sense, names that others have created. As normal speakers, we do not play any semantic role.[[18]](#footnote-18) And, of course, what makes this possible is none other than reference borrowing (understood *à la* Kripke).

On the contrary, Donnellan’s historical explanation theory leads to a radically subjectivist semantics, or so Bonanini and I have argued. Indeed, if that theory is true, every speaker plays a role in determining the semantic properties of the proper name tokens he or she produces – he or she fixes their reference, even when he or she fixes it in accordance with preceding tokens of the same name.

Now, what about Devitt’s semantics? Certainly it is not as subjectivist as Donnellan’s, since it does not identify semantic reference with speaker’s reference. But it is not as consumerist as Kripke’s, either, since it explains semantic reference in terms of speaker’s reference.[[19]](#footnote-19) Because of this, it seems to me to miss some of the power and radicality of Kripke’s chain of communication picture, according to which language is *social* through and through, and speakers can *only* use it to refer to things because some of its expressions semantically refer to these things.[[20]](#footnote-20)

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1. In this context, it is perhaps worth noting that in the later “A Puzzle about Belief,” Kripke himself wrote that the argument from ignorance is “the clearest objection” (1979: 246) to the description theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a discussion of the reasons why Kripke abstained from refining his picture “so as to give more exact conditions for reference to take place” and thus from offering a theory, see Bianchi 2015: 94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Because of this, one should be careful, when offering a causal theory of proper names, not to talk of *the* cause, or *the* origin, of a proper name token. Although certainly aware of this (“[o]bjects can be involved in the causal explanation of a name in various ways without being the object the name designates” (Devitt 1981a: 177), so the aim is “to distinguish (in nonsemantic terms) the semantically significant d[esignating]-chains from other causal connections between singular terms and the world” (129)), in his first writings even Devitt sometimes slips up, for example when he says that “we look to the cause of the utterance to determine reference” (1974: 197; see also p. 193 and 1976: 413). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Two people see Smith in the distance and mistake him for Jones. They have a brief colloquy: ‘What is Jones doing?’ ‘Raking the leaves.’ ‘Jones,’ in the common language of both, is a name of Jones; it *never* names Smith. Yet, in some sense, on this occasion, clearly both participants in the dialogue have referred to Smith” (Kripke 1977: 263). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For an interesting discussion of the many causal chains involved in this and other cases, see Almog, Nichols and Pepp 2015: 368-374. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Donnellan 1970: 342-343 and Kripke 1972: 291-292 (1980: 81) for the argument from ignorance; Donnellan 1970: 347-349 and Kripke 1972: 294-295 (1980: 83-85) for the argument from error. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Following Donnellan’s inclination, our original formulation took reference to be a relation between speakers and individuals: “In using a proper name N at the time T a speaker S refers to an individual X if and only if S’s having X in mind is appropriately involved in the explanation of S’s use of N at T” (188). The formulation I am giving here in terms of tokens, which I have chosen for ease of exposition, is equivalent. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Bianchi and Bonanini 2014: 200. Capuano 2018 tries to defend a Donnellanian treatment of these cases. Wulfemeyer 2017a uses the “Madagascar” case to argue in favor of Donnellan’s answers to our ‘causal’ questions. As is well known, the “Madagascar” case was introduced by Evans to argue against what he called the *Causal Theory of Names* (1973: 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See in particular Almog 2012 and 2014: ch. 3; Capuano 2012a, 2012b, and 2018; Pepp 2009 and 2012; Almog, Nichols and Pepp 2015; Wulfemeyer 2017a. For criticisms, see Martí 2015 and my “Reference and Language,” forthcoming. Pepp 2019 defends Donnellan’s answers and argues against Martí’s views and my own attempt (Bianchi 2015) to develop Kripke’s answers, filling in some of the details needed to transform it into a full-blown theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. As a matter of fact, Devitt continued to be mistaken about this (as many others are – for some examples, see Bianchi and Bonanini 2014: 176 n. 2). Here is what he wrote many years later in an encyclopedic entry on reference: “Kripke and Donnellan followed their criticism of description theories of names with an alternative view. This became known as the ‘causal’ ‘historical’ theory, although Kripke and Donnellan regarded their view as more of a ‘picture’ than a theory” (1998: 157-158). And he continued: “The basic idea of this theory is that a name designates whatever is causally linked to it in an appropriate way” (158). What Bonanini and I have argued is precisely that Kripke and Donnellan had very different ideas on what the “appropriate” causal link is, hence that they did not offer *one* single picture, but *two* rather different ones. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This objection is hinted at in Martí 2015: 80 n. 7. Devitt (2015: 111 n. 5) agrees. As I explain in the text, I disagree. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For the neo-Donnellanian account of (singular) thought, see especially Capuano 2015 and Wulfemeyer 2017b. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In fact, Bonanini and I ended our article by claiming that Donnellan’s historical explanation theory can be seen as anticipating some radical theses later defended by Donald Davidson (1986 and 1994):

    we believe that according to Donnellan there are no languages at all, at least from a semantic point of view. What there are, in the end, are just *uses* of expressions, aimed at communication. There are present uses, and there are past uses. Before using an expression in order to communicate something, it is certainly helpful to consider preceding uses of it – if they succeeded in communicating what we want to communicate, they may succeed again. But, as we have seen in the case of proper names, past uses do not determine the semantic properties of the expression at all. In order to communicate, *anything goes*, if it may reasonably succeed. (Bianchi and Bonanini 2014: 201)

    I criticize this aspect of Donnellan’s theory in my forthcoming “Reference and Language.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. As a consequence, Devitt (1981b: 515; 2015: 120) claims that those tokens *partially* speaker-refer to Smith and *partially* speaker-refer to Jones. As Antonio Capuano pointed out to me, Kripke (1977: 274 n. 28), as well, contemplates this possibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “We seem to need notions of speaker meaning that enable us to explain conventional meaning. It seems that conventional meaning must be built up in some way from common speaker meanings” (Devitt 1981b: 519). See also Devitt 1981a: sect. 3.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For more on Kripke’s distinction, the Gricean project, and Devitt’s perspective with regard to them, see Bianchi 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. On this issue, see also Hinchliff 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Kaplan jokingly writes that “[i]n our culture, the role of language creators is largely reserved to parents, scientists, and headline writers for *Variety*; it is by no means the typical use of language as the subjectivist semanticists believe” (602). As a matter of fact, things are not so simple, because of the phenomenon of inadvertent creation exemplified by the “Madagascar” case (see Bianchi 2015: 104-106 for a discussion). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Another aspect of Devitt’s causal theory that is relevant in this context is that, according to it, proper names can be grounded in objects not only at the moment of their introduction, but on many later occasions. As Devitt writes, in fact, “Nana is involved in the causal network for her name at more points than its beginning at her naming ceremony; the network is *multiply* grounded in her” (1974: 198; 1981a: 56). These later groundings are semantically relevant: “[d]ubbings and other first uses do not bear all the burden of linking a name to the world” (2015: 114). Thus, speakers who produce a token of a name already in use *do* play, at least sometimes, a semantic role, according to Devitt. This, again, seems to militate against considering Devitt’s semantics as fully consumerist (as I take Kripke’s to be). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. I presented drafts of this paper at the Barcelona *Language and Reality: Themes From Michael Devitt* workshop and at the Dubrovnik *Philosophy of Linguistics and Language* course, both of which took place in September 2018. I am grateful to all those who intervened on those occasions. I would also like to thank Antonio Capuano and Michael Devitt for their comments. Notwithstanding the disagreement expressed in it, I hope that the paper made it clear how great my intellectual debt to the latter is. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)