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Philosophical Approaches to Proper Names



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Can There Be a Davidsonian Theory of Empty Names?

1. Introduction

For more than a century, theories of proper names have been dominated by two traditions.¹ The Millian view holds that the linguistic function of a proper name is completely exhausted by the fact that it names its bearer (Kripke 1979). The descriptive view holds that a proper name refers in virtue of some associated information or descriptions. Kripke (1980) attributed the descriptive view to Frege (1892a), who proposed that a proper name has a sense which determines reference, and Russell (1905, 1912, 1918), who maintained that ordinary names are truncated definite descriptions.² While Kripke has convinced many that the descriptive view is fundamentally wrong, the Millian view has yet to solve several problems which motivate the descriptive view. These include Frege's puzzle about identity (Kripke 1979; Salmon 1986), the problem of empty names and the related problem of negative existentials (Braun 1993, 2005; Salmon 1998; Kripke 2013).

Empty names pose a problem for the Millian view because supposedly if the semantic function of a name is exhausted by its having a bearer, then a name that does not have a bearer should have no semantic function whatsoever. Yet intuitively, empty names not only are meaningful in actual linguistic practices but also share many features with denoting names. To start with, empty names are distinct even though they have no referent. An ordinary English user untainted by philosophical discussions on empty names would not assent to 'Sherlock Holmes is moon rabbit', or 'Sherlock Holmes is Dr Watson', even though they know that both terms do not refer. Empty names are used extensively in fictions and myths. Yet scientists also use them as theoretical terms to stand for things hypothesised

1 For more discussions, see Sainsbury (2005, ch. 1).

2 It is not my purpose here to argue how textually correct Kripke's reading is. According to Sainsbury (2002), Frege did not identify sense with descriptions, though it was sometimes thought to be so. He also argued that in claiming ordinary proper names are truncated definite descriptions, Russell was concerned with speaker's meaning but not semantic meaning as Frege and Kripke proposed.

to exist but not actually do. Literary critics engage empty names as well to discuss fictional characters in serious discussions. A competent speaker may not be able to tell whether a name is empty or not simply by looking at its orthographic, phonetic or grammatical structures. Thus, a reader may be introduced to a name without knowing at all that it is empty.³ One may use, update and alter associated information of an empty name just like any names; this is a process we all experience and enjoy as novel readers, for instance. A name can even turn from being real to fictional ('Santa Claus,' for instance, originally refers to St. Nicholas), from fictional to another fictional (a reader may find out that two fictional names co-refer, as the story unfolds), or from fictional to real (a story thought to be fictional might turn out to be real). These phenomena suggest that empty names are intelligible and the linguistic practices involving them are extremely rich and complex. It also seems impossible that empty names are to be individuated solely on reference, for otherwise they would all be the same name, if at all.

The problem is further complicated by what I called Kripke's modal constraint. According to Kripke (1980), names are rigid designators. Granted that empty names are names, empty names are also rigid designators. A rigid designator designates the same object in every possible world in which it exists (1980: 48). It follows that if a name does not refer in the actual world, it also does not refer to any object in *any* possible world. In Kripke's words, 'Holmes' simply does not name a possible-but-not-actual individual.

I thus could no longer write, as I once did, that 'Holmes does not exist, but in other states of affairs, he would have existed.' (See my 'Semantical Considerations on Modal Logic,' *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, Vol. 16 (1963) pp. 83–94; reprinted in L. Linsky (ed.), *Reference and Modality*, Oxford University Press, (1971; p. 65 in the Linsky reprint.) The quoted assertion gives the erroneous impression that a fictional name such as 'Holmes' names a particular possible-but-not-actual individual. (Kripke 1980: 158)

Kripke's modal constraint complicates the problem of empty names because it blocks a common way to explicate meaning, namely, by intension. Intension is a function from worlds to objects. Carnap (1956) used it to explicate meaning in that while 'creatures with hearts' and 'creatures with kidneys' have the same extension in the actual world, they would differ in extension in other possible worlds. However, if

3 The point is shown by the following example given by G. E. Moore (1933: 111–112). One cannot determine whether the boy concerned is real or imagined just by reading the first few sentences of a book. "There was a boy, called 'Jack,' who was a very naughty boy. Once when he was sent out to sell his mother's cow, he exchanged it for a bag of beans. His mother threw the beans into the garden, and the next morning...".

Kripke is right, an empty name would have no referent in any possible worlds; thus all empty names would have literally the same extension (namely, null extension) through and through. Hence, not only would empty names have vacuously the same reference, they should also be semantically indistinguishable if meaning is reference.

Intuitively, Davidson's theory is promising enough to give a satisfactory account of empty names outside of the polemic poles of the Millian-Fregean controversy. It stands aside from the controversy by being a sentential semantics, not needing to commit to any particular theory of reference. Davidson (1977, 1979) himself claimed that reference is a derived notion, playing no essential role in explaining the relation between language and reality (McDowell 1977: 225). Since this theory does not take reference as primary, it should not suffer from problems related to the lack of it; perhaps it may even provide resources to solve them. Moreover, since the Davidsonian system adopts homophony (to be explained in section 2), there is no need to presuppose a descriptive view about names either. Building upon the above, Sainsbury (2005) proposed a Davidsonian account of empty names called 'Reference Without Referents' (RWR).

This paper examines to what extent Davidsonian truth-theoretic semantics can give an adequate account for empty names in natural languages.⁴ It argues that the prospect is dim because of a tension between metaphysical austerity, non-vacuousness of theorems and empirical adequacy. Specifically, it argues that although RWR maintains metaphysical austerity and is formally correct, it fails to meet some desiderata of a Davidsonian theory of meaning, including the provision of non-vacuous, interpretive theorems and the promise of empirical adequacy. The root cause is that an empty name, being a rigid non-referring designator according to Kripke's modal constraint, cannot compose any truth-condition for sentences containing it. Nor can it offer any satisfaction-condition for belief reports using that name. The situation casts a heavy hit on truth-theoretic semantics like Davidson's, which explicates meaning in terms of truth and obtains empirical evidence by working through speakers' propositional attitude. It should affect any semantics based on truth; however, the impact on model-theoretic semantics would arguably be less severe because it is possible to construct multi-dimensional models, rather than just using one dimension, to explain complicate interpretations. A two-dimensional semantics for empty names is proposed for future consideration.

4 This paper does not aim to solve the problem of empty names from the Millian perspective. If a Davidsonian solution is viable, then there is no need to commit to either descriptivism or Millianism. Given that the Millian-Fregean controversy has been outstanding for quite some time, it seems desirable than not if an option of avoiding the controversy is available.

2. An outlook of a Davidsonian account of empty names

Davidson's contribution to semantics lies first and foremost in his insight for characterising meaning in terms of truth-condition (Davidson 1967). He reversed Tarski's semantic conception of truth into a truth-theoretic explication of meaning. Tarski (1944) proposed that any adequate theorem of truth takes the following form:

(T) S is true in L if and only if p ,

where ' S ' is the name of any sentence in a language L and p is a condition the satisfaction of which makes S a true sentence. Davidson turned (T) into a theorem of meaning by comparing the structural similarity between (T) and (M):

(M) S means in L that p ,

where again, ' S ' is the name of any sentence in a language L , and p is the canonical interpretation of S . The similar structure suggests that a correct *canonical* interpretation of a sentence is explicable in terms of its truth-condition. One can simply characterise p in (T) as "a translation into the meta-language of whatever sentence is referred to by the expression in the slot held by ' S '" (Sainsbury 2005: 33).

According to Davidson, an interpretive theorem of meaning is characteristically homophonic. By that it means the condition stated in the right hand side of a theorem (namely, p) is typically expressed by the same strings of words used in the left hand side (namely, S). Thus, in the following example, (1T) and (1M) are interpretive whereas (1T') and (1M') are not.

(1T) 'Snow is white' is true in English iff snow is white.

(1M) 'Snow is white' means in English that snow is white.

(1T') 'Snow is white' is true in English iff grass is green.

(1M') 'Snow is white' means in English that grass is green.

(1T) and (1M) may look trivial but are actually not.⁵ The left hand side remains a linguistic item whereas the right hand side represents some occurrences in reality.⁶

5 If we state the theorems in a different language, the sense of triviality will be gone. For example, (1T) becomes 'Snow is white' est vrai en anglais si et seulement si la neige est blanche, or 'La neige est blanche' is true in French if and only if snow is white. More discussions can be found in Davidson (1976).

6 Davidson (1980) adopted the ontology of events, rather than facts. Events are to be distinguished from facts, which are characterized by features of abstractness and a-temporality. Davidson argued that the same event can be described differently; making it possible to argue for anomalous monism in the mind-body problem, for instance.

Davidson (1973) claimed that we can find empirical evidence to support an interpretation by gathering beliefs held true among a community of speakers. This is done through observing their behaviour and employing the principles of rational action (1963: 3–4) and charity (1973: 137). The overall assumption is that an interpretive truth theory is one which enables us to make sense of the lives of those who use the language (McDowell 1977).

Once we get the theorem of meaning for a whole sentence, we can obtain axioms for its terms by compositionality. Compositionality is the thesis that ‘meaning of the sentence is a function of the structure and the meaning of its components.’⁷ It occupies a central role in Davidson’s programme in the theory of meaning, without which productivity and structural characters of natural language cannot be explained (Lepore and Ludwig 2005: 7).

Axioms for different expression types, such as names and predicates, are constructed in the following manner.

(N’) ‘Hesperus’ stands for Hesperus.

(P’) ‘Green’ is true just of green things.

More formally,

(N) For all x , ‘Hesperus’ refers to x iff $x = \text{Hesperus}$.

(P) For all x , x satisfied ‘is green’ iff x is green.

Although axioms for names (such as N) and predicates (such as P) are logically prior to theorems for sentences, it does not imply that names and predicates are ontologically more significant. Indeed, on the contrary, according to Davidson, the meaning of an expression is simply what an interpretive theorem is a *theorem of*. There is no need to specify any separate entities (sense or proposition, etc.) as meanings. The scheme is thus metaphysically austere. In particular, there is no need to paraphrase a name into any descriptions; so ‘Hesperus’ does not need to

However, the difference should not matter much here because the contrast is drawn between language and reality, rather than between language and what constitutes reality.

7 Lepore and Ludwig (2005: 26) used a different formulation of compositionality as follows: “A compositional meaning theory for a language L is a formal theory that enables anyone who understands the language in which the theory is stated to understand the primitive expressions of L and the complex expressions of L on the basis of understanding the primitive ones.” However, the difference should not matter for our present purpose.

be translated as 'the evening star'. The sense of an expression, if any, can be conceived as directly attached to the object referred, coined a *de re* sense, according to McDowell (1977). A *de re* sense could not exist unless a corresponding referent exists.

Building upon the above, Sainsbury (2005) proposed his Davidsonian account of empty names, 'Reference Without Referents' (RWR). Just as the meaning of a sentence is explicated in terms of its truth-condition, rather than truth, the meaning of a name is explicated in terms of *reference-condition*, instead of reference. For example, the following axiom holds even when nothing is *x*.

(N") For all *x*, 'Pegasus' refers to *x* iff $x = \text{Pegasus}$.

According to Textor (2010), RWR is designed to meet three demands. First, it honours Kripke's (1980) intuition that 'people can share an understanding of [the public meaning of a proper name] without sharing much (perhaps any) information concerning their bearers.' (Sainsbury 2005: 99) Second, it tries to distinguish co-referential proper names in order to solve Frege's puzzle. Finally, it caters for the theoretical desirability to treat empty and satisfied proper names on a par.

A Davidsonian scheme like the RWR satisfies the first demand by adopting homophony. It does not need to specify in virtue of what the association between a name and an object is established. It satisfies the second demand because it may explicate the interpreted logical form of a name as an ordered pair of the expression and its referent. ['Hesperus', Hesperus] and ['Phosphorus', Hesperus] are different ordered pairs; hence, no wonder the two expressions would present different cognitive values to speakers even though they refer to the same object. Frege's puzzle is thus solved.⁸

I argue, however, that the third demand is actually not met. A Davidsonian account of empty names cannot identify an interpretive truth-condition for a sentence containing an empty name. Nor can it gather any empirical evidence to support such an interpretation in order to distinguish the semantic differences of each empty name. Unlike the account of a non-empty name, all empty names would mean the same vacuously and indiscriminately under Davidson's scheme, which is against our linguistic intuition. My arguments are laid out below.

8 For details of how a Davidsonian can solve the Frege's puzzle, see Larson and Ludlow (1993), Larson and Segal (1995), Segal (1989, 1996).

3. Desiderata for a Davidsonian theory of empty names

Davidson requires a semantic theory to be formally correct as well as empirically adequate (1984: xv).⁹ It goes without saying that a correct semantic theory of a natural language also needs to be interpretive, i.e. it has to capture the genuine usage of speakers of that particular language. Different empty names are used discriminately in a natural language such as English; thus, ‘Sherlock Holmes’ is not to be confused with ‘Dr Watson’ even though they both do not denote. A satisfactory theory of empty names must meet three tasks: (i) to generate systematically theorems for sentences containing empty names; (ii) to explain in what the truth-condition consists and specify the contribution of an empty name to sentential truth; (iii) to provide empirical evidence adequate to support any proposed interpretation. The first requirement represents formal correctness, the second, non-vacuous interpretation, and the third, empirical adequacy. I argue that RWR achieves (i) by adopting free logic. However, (ii) and (iii) remain problematic.

3.1. Formal correctness

Formal correctness is a challenge to a Davidsonian account of empty names because universal instantiation, $\forall xFx \rightarrow Fa$, is a valid inference in classical logic. A Davidsonian theory would generate an undesirable result that an axiom for a name, including an empty name, would entail the existence of a respective referent if the theory adopts classical logic. To meet this challenge, McDowell (1977, 1984) gave up the intelligibility of empty names when he virtually denied empty names of any sense by maintaining that senses are *de re*. He followed Evans (1982) to claim that empty names, in lacking referents, also lack senses. Sainsbury (2005), however, chose another path: he defended the intelligibility of empty names but gave up classical logic. Free logic denies the validity of universal instantiation, thus avoiding the undesirable result mentioned above.

9 Davidson wrote that a theory of meaning should satisfy two demands, “it would provide an interpretation of all utterances, actual and potential, of a speaker or group of speakers; and it would be verifiable without knowledge of the detailed propositional attitudes of the speaker” (1984: xv). The second demand is also described as one such that “a theory of truth for a speaker can be verified without assuming too much of what it sets out to describe” (1984: xviii). I take the first demand to be about the formal power of a semantic theory to generate interpretive theorems for all meaningful utterances in the language and the second to test the empirical adequacy without assuming too much knowledge about speaker’s psychology.

There are three basic types of free logic to choose from. Positive free logic (PFL) assumes that some atomic sentences containing non-denoting terms are true. It can be justified by positing a two-domain model structure (Lambert 1962, 2001: 268–271). Meinongians in positing non-existent objects (Parsons 1980) may also support PFL. Neutral free logic, or Fregean free logic (FFL), maintains that atomic sentences containing non-denoting terms are devoid of truth-values. Lehmann (1994, 2002) argued for a strict version that all atomic sentences containing non-denoting terms are devoid of truth-values. Bencivenga (1986, 1991) suggested however that self-identity and some complex sentences containing non-denoting terms are supertrue (i.e. true after supervaluation), even though most atomic sentences containing non-denoting terms are truth-valueless. Finally, negative free logic (NFL) holds that all atomic sentences containing non-denoting terms are false, because there is nothing for the sentence to be true of (Burge 1974). NFL maintains bivalence and generates the desired result consistent with Russell's theory of description. Sainsbury chose NFL because it represents a minimal departure from classical logic (2005: 74).

The formal correctness problem is solved as long as a free logic is adopted. It does not matter for this purpose which free logic is chosen. I show below, however, that the adoption of NFL makes RWR vulnerable to the vacuousness problem because of Kripke's modal constraint.

3.2. Non-vacuous interpretation

Vacuousness is not always a problem for a theory of names. Millians such as Braun (1993) and Salmon (1998) accepted the existence of gappy propositions. Yet because meaning for the Millian is not explicated in terms of truth and truth alone, vacuousness would not lead to unintelligibility. Vacuousness is a problem for a Davidsonian, however. It is because the Davidsonian programme identifies meaning with *truth-condition* and uses it to derive reference. If an atomic sentence containing an empty proper name is not possibly true under any condition, then no sentence containing it is meaningful after all.^{10,11} The problem is not obvious though, so let me explain.

10 The claim does not entail that all necessary false sentences are unintelligible in Davidsonian semantics; indeed, on the contrary, some are and the next paragraphs explain how. The claim is that all sentences *containing an empty name* are unintelligible in Davidsonian semantics because, as I explain below, compositionality or other tricks would fail to help due to Kripke's modal constraint.

11 A reviewer pointed out that there are many (atomic) sentences involving empty names that are intuitively true, such as "Sherlock Holmes is fictitious" or "Sherlock Holmes is a Conan Doyle's character" or "Sherlock Holmes is smarter than Dr. Watson", etc.

The Davidsonian programme can explicate the meaning of a false, even necessary false, sentence. A contingently false sentence has a truth-condition. A speaker may utter a contingently false sentence, yet interpretation is possible as long as there is a situation, counterfactual or otherwise, in which the sentence is true. Truth-theoretic approach does not explain modality in terms of possible worlds but focuses on speakers' semantic knowledge and attitudes. Given the principles of rationality and charity, the satisfaction of a speaker's propositional attitudes serves as a guide to indicate which condition the speaker is anticipating and thus what the speaker presents by making the respective utterance. A radical interpreter may identify the condition under which a speaker's belief is fulfilled even when an utterance is indeed false. The mechanism aims at *truth*, even though it does not obtain.

A necessarily false sentence may have a truth-condition, too. Davidsonians can specify truth-conditions by compositionality. Suppose someone utters '2+2=5'. Although the utterance is necessarily false, each component of the utterance can be used to form some true atomic sentences, such as '2×2=4', '2 is the only even prime', '2+5=7', and innumerable many others. Given that reference is a derived notion, one can explicate the meaning of an individual term by utilising any truth it composes. For example, '2' is that which makes four when doubled, '+' is the mathematical operation making 7 with 2 and 5, so on and so forth. One can therefore compute truth-conditions of sentences that are necessarily false by rearranging and recomposing these individual component meanings. This interpretation scheme does not go beyond any Davidsonian boundary because it still depends on truth, indirectly explicated via component meanings.

The case is different, however, for sentences containing empty proper names. Suppose we want to explain 'Sherlock Holmes is intelligent'. By homophony, the relevant interpretive theorem and axiom for the name involved should take the following respective forms:

- (2T) 'Sherlock Holmes is intelligent' is true in English iff Sherlock Holmes is intelligent.
 (2N) For all x , 'Sherlock Holmes' refers to x iff $x =$ Sherlock Holmes.

Compare them with theorems and axioms for denoting names. For instance,

I acknowledge such intuitions. However, RWR adopts negative free logic and negative free logic states that all atomic sentences containing empty names are necessarily false. The burden is thus on RWR to explain how those sentences are intuitively true. Sainsbury (2009) discussed some of these issues. Briefly, the strategy was to adopt operators such that those sentences are not treated as atomic ones.

(3T) 'O'Leary is intelligent' is true in English iff O'Leary is intelligent.

(3N) For all x , 'O'Leary' refers to x iff $x = \text{O'Leary}$.

(3T) and (3N) are not vacuous because the expression 'O'Leary' stands for a real person, thus the clauses on the right hand sides specify some non-linguistic reality, rather than anything awaiting disquotation. (2T) and (2N) meet difficulty, however. There is no Sherlock Holmes in the world, so the clauses on the right hand sides do not represent any real events. Even if a speaker does believe that Sherlock Holmes is intelligent or that a certain person is Sherlock Holmes and behaves accordingly, these beliefs have no conditions of satisfaction and thus there is literally no anticipated *truth*.

Nor can we appeal to compositionality to give a sentence containing empty names a non-vacuous truth-condition like we have done in explaining necessary false statements in mathematics. Compositionality works only when component expressions constitute *some* true atomic sentences. However, negative free logic rules that all atomic sentences containing an empty name are false and so there would not be any true atomic sentence available to derive a reference-condition for that name. Davidson takes reference as a derived notion, so a *strict* Davidsonian would not reverse the direction to use reference to explain truth. The upshot is that if negative free logic is adopted and reference is a derived notion, then no reference-condition for empty names is possibly derived. Every axiom for an empty name, though formally correct, is interpretively vacuous.

One may object that although negative free logic stipulates all atomic sentences containing empty names to be false, it does allow possible truth among complex sentences, so one may use such truth to derive a reference-condition for empty names. The suggestion is denied because complex sentences containing empty names do not generate substantial truth about the unique designated content and so cannot be used to explicate the term. This claim is under the assumption that empty names are names and names are not in general descriptive in nature. Let us illustrate by considering several intuitive examples of true complex sentences containing empty names.¹² Suppose Vulcan is a hypothetical planet in an orbit between Mercury and the Sun, named by French mathematician Le Verrier.

12 There are disputes over whether self-identity statements containing empty names, such as (a) 'Vulcan is Vulcan', are true. Some logical systems consider identity as a two-place predicate and hence an identity statement is an atomic, rather than a complex sentence. Moreover, depending on which free logic is adopted, different truth-values may be assigned to identity statements containing empty names. For example, compare (a) with (b) 'Vulcan is moon rabbit'. PFL would consider (a) true and (b) false because Vulcan

- (ExM) Either Vulcan is bright or Vulcan is not bright.
 (Cont) It is false that Vulcan is bright and Vulcan is not bright
 (Cond) If Vulcan is the planet causing the perturbations in the orbit of Mercury, and any planet causing the perturbations in the orbit of Mercury will be at location *L* at 10.00 pm, then Vulcan will be at location *L* at 10.00 pm.
 (adapted from Lambert 2001: 263)

(ExM) and (Cont) are instances of the law of excluded middle and the law of contradiction respectively. Such laws are accepted as valid theorems in some logical systems, so their instances, if true, are formal truths in those systems rather than factual truths about any substantial property belonging to the object concerned. The name in these instances is replaceable by other names and the new instances are kept true; so a proper name here just functions as a variable to confer generality. Instances like these cannot derive a theorem capable of identifying uniquely the referent of the proper name concerned. For example, 'Vulcan is whatever that is either bright or not bright' is vacuous; we may rewrite (ExM) as 'For all *x*, if *x* is Vulcan, then *x* is bright, or, if *x* is Vulcan, then *x* is not bright', so 'Vulcan' needs not be used as a constant. Similar case obtains for (Cont).

Hypothetical sentences such as (Cond) are not a type of complex sentence suitable for deriving an axiom for a name either because it represents only a general relation between two properties rather than a property about a particular object. Any planet causing the perturbations in the orbit of Mercury will have the property of being at location *L* at 10.00 pm. We cannot derive a unique axiom for 'Vulcan' by the truth that Vulcan will be at location *L* at 10.00 pm, without first vindicating independently that Vulcan is the cause of the perturbations in the orbit of Mercury. Unless we can assert Vulcan as the planet causing the perturbations with further evidence, the argument is either circular or amounts to admitting that reference of a name is determined by its associated descriptive content. The latter is a view that Kripke (1980) attacked and convinced many as wrong.

The only way to derive a truth uniquely belonging to the referent of a name by conditional statements like the above is to accept the name concerned as a descriptive name. A descriptive name names whatever satisfies a certain description; Evans

and moon rabbit are different objects though they both do not exist. However, for NFL systems which consider identity statements as atomic sentences, they would grant that both are false because there is indeed no Vulcan. 'Vulcan' and 'moon rabbit' have the same referential status; they just refer to nothing. I thus argue that if NFL is used in an interpretive scheme as Davidson's theory suggests, it would have a problem differentiating meanings of different empty names.

(1982) gave the example of “Julius”: a name introduced for whoever invented the zip. Evans argued that a descriptive name has both referential status and descriptive sense. If this is the case, it seems ‘Julius is the inventor of the zip’ can be taken as an axiom to define the name and it is possible to replace every occurrence of ‘Julius’ with ‘the inventor of the zip’. When apply to hypothetical sentences such as (Cond), the sentences would then not be simply asserting a general relation between two properties but a property with a particular object.

However, it is unlikely that all proper names in natural language are descriptive names and derivatively, empty proper names are not in general descriptive names either. For example, it would be inappropriate to define ‘Sherlock Holmes’ as whoever is the most intelligent detective in Conan Doyle’s stories. For Conan Doyle might write a story about Sherlock Holmes losing his wits. Given the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ was already introduced in the novels, adding such a plot would not make ‘Sherlock Holmes’ cease to be the name of the character. This shows that the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’ is not a descriptive name.

More importantly, Kripke’s modal constraint would imply that if an atomic sentence containing an empty name is false, then it is necessarily false in all circumstances. It is because if there is nothing for the sentence to be true of in the actual world, then by rigid designation, there is also nothing for the sentence to be true of in any other worlds. Result: there simply is no possible world in which the sentence can be true.

One possible objection to the vacuousness problem is that a speaker may *know* what one believes irrespective of whether that belief has a condition to obtain; hence, it does not matter whether a sentence has a truth-condition or not. I grant that a speaker may indeed know what she believes. However, epistemic condition cannot replace truth and the problem is metaphysical rather than epistemological. Davidson’s interpretation scheme when applied to denoting names is not vacuous because his scheme tracks truth even though it relies on propositional attitude reports and complex intentional idioms. Standing on this ontological background, a Davidsonian can focus simply on explaining how correct semantic knowledge is possible and enjoy parsimony of mediating meaning entities. Without it, epistemic knowledge seems insufficient to explain all semantic functions on its own.

Larson and Segal (1995: 188–193) and Segal (2001) can legitimately posit individual concepts to explain axioms for denoting co-referential terms exactly because Frege’s puzzle does not touch on ontological issues. This is a case very different from that of non-denoting terms. Although mental files, concepts, or dossiers may contain information that happens to be about no one, their presence does not settle the truth-condition problem. We would still ask, in trying to solve problems of reference, of what the files are about? Having a certain psychological concept in mind

does not *make* a sentence, of which the concept is about, true or false. A concept presents a sense to the mind; it explains why empty names are capable of contributing thoughts to the mind. However, a concept is not the reference of a name. Frege (1892b) insisted on the distinction between concept and object: A name may link an object essentially to a concept, but the reference is the object, not the concept. Empty names are not in general concept-words for the reason that empty proper names are not in general descriptive names. Unless one wants to claim that a name is but a concept-word, which is implausible, the problem persists.

To sum up, the vacuousness problem results from a tension among the derivability of reference, negative free logic, and the lack of referents in the case of empty names. Davidson turns the explanatory base of reference from objects to truth. Empty names do not have referents, yet if it follows that they do not constitute any atomic truths with substantial content, then they would not have any reference-condition either. The path to truth is blocked. Individual concepts may explain semantic knowledge, yet they do not replace truth as a metaphysical base for reference.

3.3. Empirical adequacy

A Davidsonian theory of empty names, if successful, has to satisfy a third desideratum, namely, that it can provide adequate empirical evidence to identify a unique interpretive theorem for any particular empty name.

Davidson's strategy of interpretation requires a speakers' belief to be *held* true but not that it is indeed true; this seems *prima facie* advantageous for explaining empty names because empty names arguably do not constitute any atomic truth yet speakers may believe that sentences containing empty names are true. However, Davidson's strategy does require the content of belief, whatever it is, to have a condition of satisfaction such that by observing the speaker's behaviour and considering the salient context, an interpreter *could* specify and determine whether a condition under which the belief held true is met. A meaning theory is an empirical theory, so the conditions should at least be verifiable even if it is not verified indeed. (cf. Davidson 2001: xv and xviii).

In my view, the absence of truth-condition for a sentence containing an empty name entails the absence of its corresponding satisfaction-condition in belief contexts. Propositional attitudes containing empty names are never fulfilled because there are no such things at which the attitudes are directed. A radical interpreter may be able to collect some indirect evidence to support a particular interpretation if she relaxes the principle of charity and seeks consistency rather than agreement. However, there would be no direct evidence available to support any

unique interpretation for an empty name against all possible ones. Interpretation is significantly indeterminate and the revised interpretation mechanism would divert notably from Davidson's original design.

Let me illustrate. Suppose a child is asked why he is excited and replies, 'Because Santa Claus should be bringing my presents soon.' How should the child's utterance be interpreted? Let us consider four possible candidates as follows.

- (4a) 'Santa Claus should be bringing my presents soon' is true in English iff Santa Claus should be bringing presents to the speaker soon.
- (4b) 'Santa Claus should be bringing my presents soon' is true in English iff Uncle John should be bringing presents to the speaker soon.
- (4c) 'Santa Claus should be bringing my presents soon' is true in English iff Sherlock Holmes should be bringing presents to the speaker soon.
- (4d) 'Santa Claus should be bringing my presents soon' is true in English iff circle eats mice.

Homophony suggests that (4a) is the formally correct answer. However, there can never be empirical evidence for it because there is no Santa Claus so the condition on the right hand side will never occur. Suppose in one scenario, Uncle John brings the child presents and the child seems so happy and satisfied that the best explanation for his response is that his expectation was fulfilled. In such case, empirical evidence favours (4b) as the correct theorem for the child's previous utterance because really the presence of Uncle John and his activities fulfils the child. It does not matter whether Uncle John comes in disguise or not. Perhaps he does come in a red costume with a big white beard and speaks in a different tone. Perhaps the child does not recognise that he is Uncle John. In any case, it is not the disguise but the reality that counts in Davidson's scheme.

Consider another scenario. Suppose the child is such a single-minded believer in Santa Claus that no other person's presence would fulfil his expectation. He knows that people may disguise as Santa so he is particularly aware and even performs identity checks on people bringing him presents. Suppose many people do bring him presents. However, his expectation remains unmet because none of them are Santa. Our radical interpreter observes him, witnesses his despair and crosses out theorems such as (4b) in which 'Uncle John' is replaced by names of people who ever pretend to be Santa. In the end, the interpreter does not, and indeed never will, obtain any direct positive evidence supporting which theorem is the unique theorem interpretive of the child's original utterance.

The case is worse because any empirical evidence supporting (4a), if there is, would *equally* support a theorem such as (4c) or any theorems that contain an empty name because the right hand sides are not satisfied in any case. It would

also support (4d) because the situation described in the right hand side of (4d) would not happen either. No distinction among these theorems can be made from the empirical point of view. Yet intuitively, empty names are distinct even though they do not refer and 'Santa Claus should be bringing my presents soon' is not nonsense, though the right hand side of (4d) is. A strict Davidsonian theory of empty names would thus face a problem of indeterminacy so serious that it virtually cannot differentiate any empty name from each other and from nonsense.

A less strict Davidsonian may relax the demand for truth. Suppose that an interpreter has already mastered a significantly large part of knowledge of the language uttered, that there is a lot of common background, and that interpretation only aims at making sense of speakers' overall behaviours rather than particular successful behaviours. Under these assumptions, an interpreter may accept episodes showing representations in the speaker's mind as indirect evidence supporting a particular interpretation. Direct evidence of truth shared between the speaker and the interpreter is indeed not available in principle in the case of empty names. Collectively, if not singularly, the indirect evidence so collected may favour some option of interpretation rather than the others. There is still a high level of indeterminacy, so the argument goes, but the situation is not as bad as before. I argue, however, that this kind of interpretation is *not* the kind of interpretation required in Davidson's original proposal. The assumption of rational action holds, but the interpreter in the above scenario is no longer maximizing *agreement* with the speaker in truth, but only maximizing *consistency* of speaker's beliefs among themselves. So the principle of charity fails. Endorsing this kind of interpretation would entail significant divergence from Davidson's original theory.

Just as some may respond to the vacuousness problem by appealing to individual concept, some may also hope to evade the empirical adequacy problem by appealing to pretence. I believe that both attempts are misdirected because the problem is metaphysical rather than merely epistemological. We cannot specify a satisfaction-condition using pretence without specifying the criteria of success for such pretence. Individual concept cannot replace object as the referent of a name. Therefore, unless we commit to the descriptive theory of names, the task of explaining what *it is* to pretend when it involves a name still comes down to specifying what object *is* being pretended. Yet suppose empty names are truly empty, not primarily referring to any objects like abstract fictional characters (Salmon 1998; Kripke 2011, 2013)¹³ or non-existent objects (Parsons 1980), empty

13 Kripke (2013) proposed that empty names are ambiguous. Sometimes an empty name refers to a fictional character which is "an abstract entity exists in virtue of concrete activities

names do not provide such specification. The ontological problem persists and we are back to the original question, namely, how it is possible to differentiate empty names given that they all have no referents but vacuous truth-conditions.

The following elaborates the idea above. Suppose the child in our Santa Claus example sincerely and consistently assents to the disguised Uncle John bringing him presents as Santa Claus. He dissents from the belief that Santa Claus brings him presents when Uncle John brings him presents in his normal self. The overall behaviours support an interpreter's suspicion that Uncle John has performed some kind of pretence. The child's satisfaction that Uncle John brings him presents supports the construction of a certain condition type under which the child believes that some truth is obtained. It is not a truth-condition however because there really is no Santa. Suppose we call it a pretence-condition instead.

Prima facie, it seems quite plausible that a less radical Davidsonian interpreter may construct theorems suitable for interpreting the child's idiolect based on a pretence-condition because the child *genuinely* believes that Santa Claus is coming, except that the person supposed to be Santa is not really him. Satisfaction of the child's excitement now serves as evidence for (4e).

(4e) 'Santa Claus should be bringing my presents soon' is true in the speaker's idiolect iff a person pretending to be Santa Claus should be bringing presents to the speaker soon.

The first shortcoming of this analysis is that it is built upon evidence of the child's beliefs and behaviours only. Therefore, this analysis is limited to the child's idiolect, rather than a public language like English. The majority members of the linguistic community (such as most adults) indeed do *not* believe in Santa Claus, so they would not respond to the name similarly. Hence, even if (4e) is established, we still have not met Davidson's goal for giving an account for a natural language.

of telling stories, writing play, writing novels and so on." (2013: Lecture 3) Sometimes an empty name is used to pretend to refer when it actually does not. "Conan Doyle merely pretended to be referring to someone in using the name 'Sherlock Holmes' and to be asserting things, expressing propositions, about him" (as stated in Salmon 1998: 293–294). Salmon (1998) argued for the undesirability of this ambiguity and suggested instead an empty name always refers to an abstract entity. However, Salmon's position is not unassailable. Braun (2005) argued that it is unreasonable to suppose that an empty name, in particular a mythical name, always refers. If that is the case, then there are truly non-referring names. A Millian cannot avoid them but must deal with the existence of gappy propositions. If Braun is right, then it is impossible to explain away empty names as rigid referring designators. Indeed the opposite would be the case – empty names are primarily non-referring; referring uses may just be but derived from the non-referring uses.

Can we interpret 'Santa Claus' in English by claiming that the majority of the community *pretends to believe* that Santa Claus brings children presents then? This is not a good Davidsonian strategy because Davidsonian interpretation is based on agreement and truth, rather than falsity and pretence. Falsity and pretence may occur in many different ways. It would thus be difficult to pinpoint what people disagree *about*.

Furthermore, (4e) is raised under the assumption that a speaker truly *believes* in the content of the utterance. Unfortunately, there are often cases where even this assumption is not met. Evans (1982, ch. 10) alerted us of conniving uses of empty names in which speakers are conscious that the names they utter do not refer to any existent objects. Fiction is written with no intention for assertion and neither the author nor the reader is expected to believe in the content seriously. Indeed, it is possible that a whole community of speakers are aware that a name does not refer so *no one* ever holds any belief about its referent, yet they would succeed in establishing a consistent and continuous practice of using that name. Popular fictional names such as 'Sherlock Holmes' are cases in point. It is thus questionable whether a theory of pretence is adequate to explain the semantic functions of an empty name. Not to mention whether Davidson's interpretative scheme should apply in this kind of discourse.

Even if (4e) is an acceptable form of an analysis, it is still not a good analysis unless we can cash out the 'Santa Claus' in the right hand side, namely, to figure out what it is for a person pretending to be Santa Claus, in some naturalist terms. To determine whether a person has successfully pretended to be Santa, there need to be some criteria or standards of success. It is natural to postulate that a standard of success to pretence is that which makes people believe in what is being pretended. In the case of a denoting name, it is easy to specify those standards by citing the person referred. A Barrack-Obama-pretender pretends well if and only if he makes people believe that he is Barrack Obama. A mud-pie is a pie-in-pretence if and only if there is such a thing as a pie and the children play with the mud-pie in the same way they would with a pie. What are the criteria of success when an empty name is involved? If, as the Millian suggests, a name is not just a truncated description, then we should not want to reduce the standard of success about pretending Santa to a bundle of descriptions. Yet there really is no Santa. So *who or what* could Uncle John supposedly pretend to be?¹⁴ The semantic problem

14 We cannot appeal to individual concept because not only an individual concept is not the reference, but also that it begs the question of asking how a concept, containing information and descriptions yet its content is not reducible to them, stands as a concept of an individual when there is no individual at all.

for accounting an empty name is not solved or avoided by appealing to pretence. It just reappears immediately.

The pretence theory depends heavily on psychological concepts like perceived truth rather than truth *simpliciter*. I thus wonder how far it has departed from Davidson's proposed programme to be worth calling a Davidsonian theory. More importantly, since pretence is likely to be individuated on individual concepts, this theory runs the risk of confusing sense and reference and perhaps even of reducing semantics to psychology.¹⁵

In sum, I do not argue that Davidson's theory is massively erroneous as a general semantic theory; I only point out challenges for a Davidsonian account of empty names. The challenge on formal correctness can be recovered by adopting free logic. Yet those on theoretical vacuousness and empirical adequacy remain acute. All three challenges originate from Davidson's upholding the primacy of truth and acknowledging no semantic notions (reference or sense) other than truth. Together they show Davidson's theory is probably metaphysically too austere to provide a thorough semantic theory for all expression types.

4. What to take from here

I think an essential inadequacy of a Davidsonian approach to empty names is that it makes use of only one dimension of truth-conditions, namely, truth-conditions varying over contexts of evaluation under one particular interpretation, to explicate meaning. The Davidsonian T-schema makes interpretation relative to one and only one language. T-sentences are sentences within a particular language *L*. If different languages are involved, they have to be explicated using completely different sets of axioms and theorems, making it impossible to represent alternative languages on the same platform. It is not an issue if we always say and know what a sentence says literally. However, linguistic usage can be so varied that sometimes it is helpful to model the uses of actual language on alternative languages. It would be like that the speaker switches temporarily to an alternative language for play. For example, we may or may not know that a name is empty, or even if we do,

15 Sainsbury does not claim proper names are names of individual concepts. I do not know either what he would think about the pretence theory I state here. I only put the threat to psychologism as a general risk to theories appealing to psychological concepts. I suspect Sainsbury's notion of individual concepts serve roughly the same function as what I understand from Frege's sense. But I would not sustain or verify my speculation any further here.

we still want to use the name *as if* it refers.¹⁶ It is a metaphysical matter whether a name is indeed empty; however, it is quite a separate issue whether users of a language have access to that fact and use it in their speech. Indeed, speakers may use an empty expression knowing that it is empty (as in fiction), without knowing that it is empty (as in scientific hypothesis), or being ambivalent about whether it is empty (as in myths and literary criticism). Therefore, the metaphysical status of a term's referent may not inform speakers' attitudes toward it at all. Yet Davidsonian semantics relies exactly on such relation to identify meaning.

Suppose we want to model varying usages of an empty expression. Suppose we regard these usages as characteristic and essential parts of the semantic function of this expression type. Suppose further that we do not want to commit to a theoretical position that names are to be reduced to descriptions, which the Millians (Kripke 1980; Soames 1998) vehemently attack. I propose that alternative language is no more irrelevant in these cases. On the contrary, they should be drawn as a part of the semantics of an empty name.

My proposal is to explicate empty names in terms of a two-dimensional model-theoretic framework.¹⁷ The two dimensions are contexts of evaluation and contexts of utterance.¹⁸ A name designating nothing in one context of utterance (one language) continues to designate nothing in any possible contexts of evaluation because names are rigid designators. This conforms to Kripke's modal constraint. However, a name designating nothing in one context may designate an object in some other contexts of utterance. Let us call the function by which an empty

16 Lewis (1978) proposed a counterfactual theory of fiction with ideas similar to mine. According to him, "a sentence of the form 'In the fiction *f*, Φ ' is non-vacuously true iff, whenever *w* is one of the collective belief worlds of the community of origin of *f*, then some world where *f* is told as known fact and Φ is true differs less from the world *w*, on balance, than does any world where *f* is told as known fact and Φ is not true. It is vacuously true iff there are no possible worlds where *f* is told as known fact." (1978: 273)

17 More discussions about two-dimensional semantics can be found in Kaplan (1977), Stalnaker (1978, 2003, 2006), Jackson (1998), Chalmers (2006), and García-Carpintero and Macià (2006). It should be noted that there are indeed many accounts of two-dimensional semantics and my account is different from most of them.

18 A context of evaluation is the totality of facts against which a sentence under a certain interpretation is evaluated; it represents the factual condition of truth. A context of utterance is individuated by what is associated with an expression in a certain possible centred world. Centred worlds are "worlds marked with a "centre", which is an ordered pair of an individual and a time. We can think of the centre of the world as representing the perspective of the speaker within the world" (Chalmers 2006: 60).

name denotes something in an alternative context of utterance counterfactual reference and the object so named a counterfactual referent. A counterfactual referent can be identified descriptively or causally; for example, the same causal process of naming may occur but happen to name an object rather than nothing. Hence, this theory is not committed to either descriptivism or Millianism. I call this a counterfactual reference theory of empty names (CR).¹⁹

I cannot offer a complete formulation and full explanation here due to space, but let me try pointing out some most relevant points. Normally, we do not care about counterfactual referents because they are not referents of the names in our actual language. However, they can be useful in explaining what it is to use an empty name in our contexts. For examples, it distinguishes an empty name from others even though they are all about nothing. In case pretence is involved, it explains what it is to pretend when there is nothing to be pretended. Finally, it explains how one can hold a belief involving an empty name sincerely because such belief is not held between something (the agent) and nothing (what an empty name supposedly refers) but between the agent and a counterfactual referent even though the agent may not be aware of it. The function involved is not reference but counterfactual reference; the object involved is not the referent but a counterfactual referent.

Let me elaborate. Within a particular language, if a sentence does not have a truth-condition and compositionality fails to help, a Davidsonian interpreter is left with few, if any, tricks to manoeuvre. Yet if alternative languages are listed, it is possible to pinpoint a formal theory of meaning for particular expression types in that language by employing variance over different contexts of utterance to explain how play or pretence happens. Play or pretence is understood here as a temporary shift to a similar language except that the name involved is not empty. 'A mud-pie is a pie' is not true in English, yet it is true in the language used in children's play. Similarly, 'Santa Claus should be bringing my present soon' is not true when Uncle John brings the child his present. Yet for some moments, Uncle John's presence is a good explanation for the child's excitement.

'Sherlock Holmes' is an empty name in our actual language. However, if a different causal history is at play and the name were to name a real person, it could refer to a certain concrete person in a possible world. Let us call this person Solmes. Solmes is the counterfactual referent of 'Holmes'. Solmes may or may not have many characteristics attributed to the referent of 'Holmes'. Like any denoting names, those characteristics, if any, fix a referent rather than giving the name

19 This theory will be expanded in Lee (work in progress).

meaning (Kripke 1980). Information about 'Holmes' can be stored, deleted and altered, forming an individual concept HOLMES around Solmes, while nothing really satisfies HOLMES because Solmes is not the referent of 'Holmes' in the actual language. Yet speakers can form intensional relations with Solmes, which could have been the referent of 'Holmes'. Intensional relation is established between speakers and the counterfactual referent of an empty name. On the one hand, 'Holmes' is truly empty. It refers to nothing and remains so under the same interpretation across various contexts of evaluation. In this way, 'Holmes' is a rigid designator and Kripke's modal constraint is respected. On the other hand, HOLMES is not the referent of 'Holmes'; so there is no confusion between sense and reference. Although nothing fully satisfies HOLMES (for example, Solmes is not the referent of 'Holmes'), the speaker of 'Holmes' still has something to relate to. With the postulation of a counterfactual referent, it is possible to explain what a speaker conveys even when there is nothing to which it is about literally.

We can use counterfactual reference to distinguish empty names. Although all empty names refer to nothing, they might refer to something in some possible worlds and counterfactually refer to different things in different possible worlds. We can thus characterise an empty name as ordered pairs of worlds and associated counterfactual referents. Different names would then have different counterfactual-reference-conditions. Correspondingly, the associated attitudes would also be different. The ways to play with a mud-pie are different from the ways to play with Santa Claus; children would express different beliefs and behave differently. This is all because the respective names could counterfactually refer to completely different things.

To conclude, this paper argues that it is difficult to give a satisfactory Davidsonian account for empty names because empty names do not contribute to truth. Whether my solution works or not does not affect the argument. I suggest we pay attention to two kinds of truth-conditions: those varying across contexts of evaluation under a fixed interpretation and those varying across contexts of utterance. The former gets the metaphysics right whereas the latter provides extra resources to explain semantic knowledge, complex usage, and speakers' attitudes about empty names.

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