REPLY

Cross-cultural variation and perspectivalism: Alignment of two red herrings?

Jincai Li

School of Foreign Languages, East China
Normal University, Shanghai, China

Correspondence
Jincai Li, School of Foreign Languages,
East China Normal University,
No. 500, Dongchuan Rd., Minhang
District, Shanghai, 200241, China.
Email: jcli@english.ecnu.edu.cn

In this brief reply I respond to criticisms of my book, *The referential mechanism of proper names*, from Michael Devitt and Nicolo D'Agruma. I focus on the question of whether the perspectivism advocated in the book explains the empirical results there detailed.

KEYWORDS
cross-cultural variations, epistemic perspectives, experimental semantics, red herrings, referential intuitions, theory of reference

1 | INTRODUCTION

I deeply appreciate Michael Devitt's and Nicolò D'Agruma's very encouraging commentaries and insightful criticisms of my book *The referential mechanism of proper names* (2023). Each of them has reviewed it critically from different angles and raised a series of issues fundamental to (testing) theories of reference for me to grapple with. Due to space constraints, I will focus on two central challenges from Devitt and D'Agruma.

While both Devitt and D'Agruma appreciate the significance of the experimental findings on proper names reported in my book, they dispute that these results have the significance I envisage. The major challenges they posed are summarized as follows. Devitt (2023) argues that the two major concerns dominating my experimental studies of proper names—cultural variations and epistemic perspectives—are red herrings for the theory of reference. In Devitt's view, perspectivalism is not relevant to reference and cannot explain away the cross-cultural variation. Instead, he argues that the most likely account of the cultural patterns emerging from the studies is the blamelessness hypothesis or maybe that of social conformism. In a similar but less radical vein, D'Agruma (2023) acknowledges the perspectivalist account of cultural variability, but objects that the inference from perspectivalism to the theory of reference is unwarranted and hence unsuccessful. In what follows, I will respond to these two principal strands of objections in turn.

2 | CROSS-CULTURAL VARIATION AND THE UNDERLYING CAUSE(S)

By now, few would deny the cross-cultural as well as the intra-cultural variation of referential intuitions elicited from the Gödel-style thought experiments. From the earliest classic study on the reference of proper names by Machery et al. (2004) to the latest independent replication study of US-China differences in cognition and perception by a group of psychologists (Cao et al., 2022), the cultural effects on people's referential judgments have proven to be quite strong and robust, emerging as early as 7 years of age (Li et al., 2018). The natural question is why. How could people from different cultural backgrounds respond to the Gödel-like cases differently with such systematicity?

Based on the results from Study 1, I briefly considered the hypotheses of initial cultural learning, acquisition of proper names, politeness strategies (pp. 62–65; also in Li et al., 2018), and empirically investigated the effects of moral valence on referential intuitions (pp. 70–91). But due to lack of clear and sufficient empirical evidence, I left all these conjectures open for further discussion and exploration. What offers the best explanation of the cultural variation, in my view, is the culturally distinct perspective-taking strategy as revealed by Studies 4 and 5, but this perspectivalist account receives strong criticism from Devitt and comparatively milder critiques from D'Agruma. Let me first recount my rationale behind the proposal.

Following Sytsma and Livengood (2011) and Sytsma et al. (2015), I suspect the *epistemic asymmetry* in the Gödel-style vignettes leads to *ambiguity in epistemic perspectives* in answering the probe questions, which then results in the different patterns of judgments from participants. To test this hypothesis, I manipulated the epistemic perspective from which the test questions should be answered in three conditions using both a between-subject (Study 4) and within-subject design (Study 5). The three conditions are the *original* condition which involves epistemic ambiguity, the *internal* condition which specifies the relevant perspective is that of the character within the story world, and the *external* condition in which the pertinent perspective is the narrator's. Such experimental manipulation produces results that showcase how people could keep track of the different knowledge status in the probes and flexibly shift between the distinct epistemic perspectives both at the group level and the individual level. When the perspective is ambiguous as in the *original* condition, the Chinese participants tended to adopt the imaginary speaker's perspective while the Americans would insist on their own, thus displaying clear-cut cultural patterns in their intuitive judgments. But when the perspective is disambiguated perspective-wise in the *internal* and *external* conditions, both the Chinese and American participants could adopt the specified perspective and give congruent answers. That is, switching perspectives switches responses. These findings offer compelling evidence for the hypothesis that the cultural variations in referential intuitions are largely induced by the culturally distinct perspective-taking strategies.

Devitt, however, diagnoses serious problems in this account, insisting that "this appeal to epistemic perspectives is deeply misguided". Devitt's objection to the perspectival hypothesis is grounded in his firm realist stance. He starts by pointing out the metaphysical distinction between *reality* and people's *beliefs/perspectives* about reality and asserts that "the foundational error of perspectivalism is the conflation of reality with perspectives on reality" (2023). This is indeed a crucial distinction that echoes the second methodological flaw of linguistic pragmaticism regarding "the confusion of metaphysics of meaning with the epistemology of interpretation" in one of his earlier works (Devitt, 2013), and we should not ignore it when we theorize about the meaning and reference issues of language.

But how does this distinction fare in my account? Let us compare Devitt's example of the weather at Trump's inaugural with the Gödel-type cases. True, when we ask whether it rained at Trump's inaugural, we are not asking whether Trump or anyone else thinks it rained or not. We are asking about the objective reality of the external world independent of any certain individual's knowledge of the weather of the day. This presumably holds true for most ordinary cases that are free of fanciful dramas. For instance, when we ask who won the 2020 United States presidential election, it would be quite inappropriate to respond that "Trump thinks he won the election". But things seem to become different in the peculiar Gödel-style vignettes when participants are invited to judge whether Emily the misinformed speaker is right in saying that Pickles was the dog that won the Super Dog Race. In this imaginary story world, people do not have any first-hand experience of the Super Dog Race. All they know about the event is from the newspaper report which, unbeknownst to them, is mistaken and they are never informed of otherwise. They may always use the name "Pickles" to talk about the winner of the race, because they have no knowledge of the dog Max. But for people outside of this hypothetical world, like the participants in the experiment, they have learnt everything about the event from the written vignette and hence they know much more than the misinformed characters. Then when such an omniscient individual from the external world is asked to evaluate the truth-value of a name-containing statement as uttered by the poor misled Emily in a conversation with her equally ignorant fellows, why would it be so surprising and odd for this epistemically privileged person to take into consideration the things inside the story world? Here it seems reasonable to "use insight into the speaker's mind" to figure out the reference of the name she has used. Thus, I suppose perhaps the metaphysical distinction needs to be compromised in complex and peculiar cases like the Gödel-style scenarios that involve obvious and large discrepancy in people's knowledge states.

Aside from this talk of metaphysical confusion, Devitt also emphasizes the non-existence of "epistemic ambiguity" in the probes. He insists that the participants are only asked the question "Is Emily right" in making the statement "Pickles was the dog that won the Super Dog Race", which is clear and without any annexed elements. Granted, this question per se is not ambiguous. It is different from literally and straightforwardly asking the question "From Emily's perspective, is Emily right" or "From the narrator's perspective, is Emily right". Nonetheless, what is causing ambiguity in the experimental context is the preceding narration of the reality of the dog race and the limited information Emily and her community members get about the race. Having read accounts of the historical events in the vignette and being informed of the huge gap in knowledge status between the speaker Emily and the narrator as well as the people like the participants themselves outside of the imaginary world, the participants are propelled to consider the different epistemic perspectives relevant in the scenario. Such a strong propensity is showcased by the participants' justificatory remarks for their responses. A vast majority of the Chinese participants (and a few Americans) who answered "yes" justified their answers using words like "from her perspective", "in her opinion", "according to/ based on what she knows", "for all she knows", "as far as she knows", and so forth. Indeed, in personal communications after the experiments, some participants also expressed their frustration in determining the truth-value of the statements, as they felt they were so strongly pulled apart between the two answer choices, thinking to themselves that Emily is right in one sense but wrong in another sense. If, as Devitt stresses, "there is no 'epistemic ambiguity' in the probe" and participants do not have to consider anyone's perspective but only the reality of the world, then how to make sense of their justifications? It seems hasty to dismiss them all as misunderstandings of the task and hence pure noises. It would also be inappropriate to regard the Chinese participants as

incompetent survey takers either. After all, they behave quite satisfactorily in the accompanying control tasks.

Intriguingly, in interpreting the exemplary justifications from participants, Devitt finds a blamelessness hypothesis "much more plausible" than the appeal to perspectivalism. According to this hypothesis, "Chinese, but not Americans, are prone to say that Emily is right because she is blameless for being wrong". In particular, when the Chinese participants' responses in the *original* condition are compared with those in the *external* condition, the boost in the causal-historical answer triggers the question why they judge Emily to be right but Kermit to be wrong. To Devitt, the most likely explanation is that "Chinese think that Emily couldn't have known the truth and so is blameless; Kermit, in contrast, should have known" (2023). Convincing as this account sounds, I find it essentially just about the same as the perspectivalist account I have sketched. If, in determining the truth-value of Emily's and Kermit's name-containing statements, epistemic perspectives are not relevant and the participants do not have to consider the different knowledge status in the first place, how can they possibly judge whether the characters are blameless or not?

Last but not least, in his criticism of the appeal to perspectivalism, Devitt also questions the point of introducing the speaker Emily into the vignettes. He suggests that the "red herring" of perspectives might be removed if we adopt a design like that of Devitt and Porot (2018) where this imaginary character and her linguistic cohorts are dropped. But in my experimental design, the addition of Emily and her community members like her brother, father, and teacher is an ingenious idea partly intended for the developmental study and partly for avoiding invoking the *semantic reference* versus *speaker's reference* distinction. In future studies on adults only, we could follow Devitt's suggestions and invite participants to evaluate the truth-value of the statement "Pickles was the dog that won the Super Dog Race", not attributed any speaker, and then offer explanations for their judgments, in addition to the confidence rating question (Devitt & Porot, 2018). I bet at least some Chinese participants would express indeterminacy through their justifications and confidence ratings.

Therefore, as far as the debate goes, my faith in perspectivalism has not yet wavered. Given the data reported in my book and those in the prior works in experimental semantics, I maintain that the perspectival hypothesis is still better than the other alternative accounts such as politeness strategy, social conformism, moral valence, or acquisition of proper names. Nonetheless, it should be noted that since the cross-cultural style is so far observed *only* in the Gödel-style probes, my perspectivalist account is accordingly restricted to studies that employ such probes.

3 | FROM PERSPECTIVALISM TO REFERENCE

If we endorse the epistemic-perspective interpretation of the cultural variability in people's referential intuitions in the Gödel-type cases, the next question then is what the import of this hypothesis would be? Is the cultural variation that has "loomed so large in experimental semantics ... just noise, a red herring to the theory of reference", as claimed by Devitt? Or is it indicative of the reference of proper names, even though only partially so as argued by D'Agruma?

In an earlier paper (Li, 2021), I refrained from drawing inferences about the reference of names based on the two perspective-taking studies only, and instead reflected on how (not) to test theories of reference and the robustness of referential intuitions in experimental philosophy (pp. 22–24). In the latest book, with all the empirical findings from the five studies at hand, I

endeavor to provide insights into the referential mechanism of proper names, hence presenting a relatively bolder move from perspectivalism to reference. Admittedly, due to space constraints, the theoretical reflections on the theory of reference in the penultimate chapter are "rather cursory" and call for more in-depth discussions. Here, I will mostly take up D'Agruma's challenges and take another shot at bridging perspective taking and reference fixing in the peculiar Gödel-like scenarios.

In D'Agruma's critical notice (2023), he argues that "either Li's results do not enable an experimental comparison of the two classical theories of reference or their support for the Ambiguity View is limited to the Chinese sample". According to D'Agruma, if participants in the *original* condition respond from Emily's perspective as exemplified in the *internal* condition, then their judgments are "not suitable to test" the two theories of reference, because both theories predict that Emily will receive the extra credit if she utters that name-containing sentence. If they respond from Kermit's perspective as exemplified in the *external* condition, their answers are also useless because both theories "make the same prediction" and hence "an experimental comparison (2023) is precluded". In justifying for this conclusion, D'Agruma appeals to the "New Meaning Objection" originally put forward by Devitt and Porot (2018) which claims "the vignette introduces an additional descriptivist meaning" that is different from the only definite description available to Emily and her cohort. But I doubt this meaning will arise, as towards the end of each prompt it is emphasized at least twice that people in the imaginary world have extremely limited information about the historical events and the characters in the stories. For example, in the Super Dog Race story, it reads "they have all learned Pickles won the race. But they don't know anything else about Pickles or the race", and then just after three lines it goes "this is the only thing they knew about the race. They didn't know anything about Max". Even if the new meaning does arise irrespective of the heavy textual emphasis, I do not believe that a reasonable descriptivist will adopt a description entirely inaccessible to the user of a name to figure out its reference, as I have objected in the book (p. 61). I am thus delighted to see that D'Agruma finds my "text compatible also with the denial" of the new meaning thesis. Nonetheless, even in this case, D'Agruma objects that the *ambiguity view* cannot be corroborated because in the *external* condition (which he thinks is the only condition that could potentially offer support for the view) the Americans are overwhelmingly causal-historical, and the Chinese appear to be causal too although there is some room for them being descriptive. Hence, D'Agruma considers the *external* condition at most provides partial evidence for the ambiguity view.

However, in the experimental framework I engage with, the three conditions should be considered together. Crucially, the *original* condition is the main venue where insights into the reference of names are expected to be obtained, whereas the *internal* and *external* conditions are primarily intended as *contrasting* conditions that help to illustrate what the judgment patterns would be like when the pertinent perspective is clearly specified. One may argue that the *internal* condition is empty or that the *external* condition is misconceived, but it should be less controversial that the *original* condition bears directly on the reference of proper names because the descriptivist theory and causal-historical theory do make divergent predictions, thus enabling an experimental comparison of the two classical theories of reference. Meanwhile, due to the inherent epistemic asymmetry in the vignettes, as argued in the preceding section, some participants might be inclined to take the speaker Emily's perspective and fix the reference of the name in her statement descriptively, which will produce "yes" responses; others may tend to insist on their own privileged position and fix the reference of the name in a causal-historical manner, hence giving "no" answers. What the experimental results reveal is exactly such an

alignment of the cross-cultural pattern of referential judgments and perspective-taking strategies. The point of view from which the hypothetical scenarios are to be construed determines to a large extent the way to fix the reference of names in the imaginary speaker's statement. In this sense, the pluralist stance on reference appears more appealing than the monist one, as both classical theories might be right. Nevertheless, while the current results seem to better support the *ambiguous* view than the *hybrid* view within the pluralist camp, more research is needed to show how descriptive and causal-historical information interacts in the process of reference fixing.

In sum, I hold the view that the data from the *original* condition (at least) and other similar experiments inspired by the Gödel case should not be dismissed as "pure noises" or "distorted" judgments, for they could throw light on reference, that is, the "cross-cultural semantics" (Machery, 2021). To further examine the plausibility of this conjecture, we may replace the Gödel-style vignettes with novel and diverse prompts that avoid the documented issues in the experimental semantics literature (Li & Zhu, 2023) and develop tests of linguistic usage of names in more general and natural settings (Devitt, 2011, 2012, 2015; Devitt & Porot, 2018; Martí, 2014).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
There are no data available.

ORCID
Jincai Li https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2629-5014

REFERENCES
Cao, A., Carstensen, A., Gao, S., & Frank, M. C. (2022). US-China differences in cognition and perception across 12 tasks: Replicability, robustness, and within-culture variation. https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/bxqj5

D'Agruma, N. (2023). *From the epistemic perspectives in experimental semantics to the ambiguity of proper names: Is the inference warranted? A critical notice of Jincai Li's The referential mechanism of proper names.* Mind & Language. https://doi.org/10.1002/MILA.12472

Devitt, M. (2011). Experimental semantics. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXXXII, 418–435.

Devitt, M. (2012). Whither experimental semantics? *Theoria*, *27*(1), 5–36.

Devitt, M. (2013). Three methodological flaws of linguistic pragmatism. In C. Penco & F. Domaneschi (Eds.), *What is said and what is not: The semantics/pragmatics interface* (pp. 285–300). CSLI Publications.

Devitt, M. (2015). Testing theories of reference. In J. Haukioja (Ed.), *Advances in experimental philosophy of language* (pp. 31–63). Bloomsbury Academic.

Devitt, M. (2023). *Red herrings in experimental semantics: Cultural variation and epistemic perspectives. A critical notice of Jincai Li's The referential mechanism of proper names.* Mind & Language.

Devitt, M., & Porot, N. (2018). The reference of proper names: Testing usage and intuitions. *Cognitive Science*, *42*, 1552–1585.

Li, J. (2021). The origin of cross-cultural differences in referential intuitions: Perspective taking in the Gödel case. *Journal of Semantics*, *38*(3), 415–440.

Li, J. (2023). *The referential mechanism of proper names: Cross-cultural investigations into referential intuitions.* Routledge.

Li, J., Liu, L., Chalmers, E., & Snedeker, J. (2018). What is in a name: The development of cross-cultural differ-ences in referential intuitions. *Cognition*, *92*, 108–111.

Li, J., & Zhu, X. (2023). Twenty years of experimental philosophy research. *Metaphilosophy*, *54*, 29–53. https://doi.org/10.1111/meta.12602

Machery, E. (2021). Cross-cultural semantics at 15. In S. Biggs & H. Geirsson (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of linguistic reference* (pp. 535–550). Routledge.

Machery, E., Mallon, R., Nichols, S., & Stich, S. P. (2004). Semantics, cross-cultural style. *Cognition*, *92*(3), B1–B12.

Martí, G. (2014). Empirical data and the theory of reference. In B. Kabasenche, M. O'Rourke, & M. Slater (Eds.), *Reference and referring: Topics in contemporary philosophy* (Vol. 10). MIT Press.

Sytsma, J., Livengood, J., Sato, R., & Oguchi, M. (2015). Reference in the land of the rising sun: A cross-cultural study on the reference of proper names. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, *6*, 213–230.

Sytsma, J., & Livengood, J. (2011). A new perspective concerning experiments on semantic intuitions. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *89*(2), 315–332.

How to cite this article: Li, J. (2023). Cross-cultural variation and perspectivalism: Alignment of two red herrings? *Mind & Language*, 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1111/mila.12470