



# Review of Dolf Rami's 'Names and Context: A Use-Sensitive Philosophical Account'

Bloomsbury Academic: London. 2022. Xi + 288 pp. £76.50 (hardback)

Nikhil Mahant<sup>1</sup>

Received: 19 January 2022 / Accepted: 28 May 2022

© The Author(s) 2022

Much of the debate on the semantics of names in the latter half of the past century had been characterized by—to use Mark Sainsbury's phrase—'unproductive oscillations' between the Millian and the Descriptivist theories (Sainsbury, 2005, p. 2). The focus of more recent philosophical theorizing, however, has broadened from the narrow investigation of names in their most frequent use as singular terms to a wider investigation that takes note of the often overlooked, but philosophically significant, uses of names as general terms (e.g., in 'Many *Alfreds* live in Princeton' (Burge, 1973)) and even anaphoric expressions (e.g., in 'If a child is christened "Bambi", then Disney will sue *Bambi's* parents' (Geurts, 1997)).

Such uses have motivated positions that seek to assimilate the semantics of names within the semantics of common nouns (e.g., Elbourne (2005), Gray (2012), Fara (2015), Bach (2015)), indexicals (e.g., Rami (2014)), and pronouns (e.g., Schouby (2017, 2020)). Keeping the promise of the 'Mind, Meaning and Metaphysics' series, Dolf Rami's book provides, first, a comprehensive overview of the cutting-edge developments in the philosophical discussion on names and second, an argument for a new 'Use-sensitive' account according to which names are primarily singular terms whose semantics cannot be assimilated within the semantics of any other linguistic category.

The helpful Prolegomenon at the beginning of the book poses thirteen challenges for a semantic theory of names to meet. While some are familiar classical problems (e.g., the problem of empty names, Frege's puzzle, etc.) others have been discussed only recently (e.g., the systematic but non-uniform failure of substitutivity of a name with a past name such as 'St. Petersburg'/'Leningrad'; p. 22, p. 116). The point of discussing these problems is, of course, to establish a desideratum—the merits of a semantic account must be judged based on the adequacy of the response it provides

---

✉ Nikhil Mahant  
Mahant\_Nikhil@phd.ceu.edu

<sup>1</sup> Department of Philosophy, Central European University, Quellenstrasse 51, 1100 Vienna, Austria

to these challenges. Rami makes a case—briefly in the prolegomenon and at length in later chapters—that the Use-sensitive account fares better than its competitors in responding to these challenges.

The rest of the book is organized into seven chapters. Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 5 are modified versions of papers published earlier in peer-reviewed journals/edited-collections. The original papers contained arguments for a slightly different view and have been included in the book in a revised form to present a single, comprehensive argument for the Use-sensitive account. Chapter 2 also proposes an account of the metaphysics of names that was not present in the original papers. Chapters 4, 6, and 7 contain new discussion of fictional uses of names, anaphoric/bound uses of names, and the behaviour of names in hyper-intensional contexts not published elsewhere. Of these, Chap. 6—which argues that many anaphoric uses of names are nonliteral—will be of particular interest for theorists who take proper names to have the same linguistic nature as indexicals/pronouns. All notes and references are placed by the publisher at the end of the book, causing an inconvenience to the reader which could have been avoided.

The book summarizes the Use-sensitive account in fourteen theses (p. 39–42). I will focus on three features that form the philosophical core of the account. The classical Millian view, held by e.g., Marcus (1961) and Kripke (1980), treats a name as analogous to a tag or an individual constant of first-order logic—i.e., as a simple and *exclusive* device of reference. The increased recognition of predicative and anaphoric uses of names in recent years has turned the dialectic away from this simplistic picture. By arguing for the view that proper names are primarily—although not exclusively—used to refer to individuals (p. 38, 104, 159), the Use-sensitive account is, first, an attempt at defending a version of the Millian orthodoxy. A substantial chunk of the book (e.g., Chaps. 5 and 6) is thus devoted to arguing that non-referential uses of names must be thought of as derived from their primary, referential uses.

Like pure indexicals, deictic pronouns, and demonstratives, proper names are context-sensitive expressions—the same name can be used to refer to different individuals in different contexts. Rami argues that even amongst context sensitive expressions, the linguistic behaviour of proper names is closer to that of demonstratives (which are a type of what he calls ‘use-sensitive expressions’) than pure indexicals (‘occasion-sensitive expressions’). The referent of an occasion-sensitive expression is determined by its linguistic meaning (e.g., the character of indexicals) and the (Kaplanian) context of utterance—i.e., agent, time, location of utterance, and world. For instance, the indexical ‘I’ always refers to the agent and the indexical ‘here’ to the location. The referential use of use-sensitive expressions, on the other hand, is not so restricted. The linguistic meaning of a demonstrative and the context *constrain* but do not *determine* the object that a demonstrative refers to: depending on the intentions, attitude, or behaviour of language users, a demonstrative like ‘this cat’ may be used to refer to one cat or another present in the vicinity of the agent.

The second key feature of the Use-sensitive account is its classification of proper names as use-sensitive expressions (p. 120). Like demonstratives, the intentions, attitudes, or actions of the agent play a large role in determining the referent of a name. The question of how exactly the referent of a name is determined, Rami argues, has an answer much more complex than the one provided by classical theories (p. 74–76).

For one, the referent of a name may only be determined relative to a *use* of a name, and for another, there is no single mechanism underlying reference determination: sometimes the referent of a use of a name is determined—as Kripke suggests—by appeal to a historical chain of communication that the use is part of, at other times it is determined descriptively, at yet other times via a demonstration (e.g., when introducing someone on stage as ‘We are very proud to present you *Peter James*.’) The result is a rather liberal ‘pluralist’ view of reference determination (p. 92–94) which allows for the referential use of any word (apart from an indexical, a demonstrative, or a definite description) to count as the use of a *name*.

One theoretical innovation of the book is its deployment of the distinction between two distinct layers of meaning—‘truth-conditional’ and ‘use-conditional’—in the semantic debate on names (p. 23, 96, 127). The truth-conditional meaning of an expression is the aspect of its meaning that constrains (or determines) the truth-conditional contribution of the expression in a context. For example, the character of an indexical is the truth-conditional meaning of the indexical because it determines its truth-conditional contribution (i.e., its content) in a context. The use-conditional meaning of an expression, on the other hand, does not constitute, constrain, or determine its truth-conditional contribution. Instead, it only determines whether an expression has been used *felicitously*. For example, the truth-conditional meaning of the German second person pronouns ‘Sie’ and ‘du’ are the same, but their use-conditional meanings are not—the former can be felicitously used in formal contexts, but not the latter (p. 169).

The third key feature of the Use-sensitive account is its commitment to the view that a proper name has a use-conditional meaning, which restricts the felicitous uses of a name *N* to the *bearers* of ‘*N*’ (T6, p. 40). Bearing a name is not the same as being referred to by it—an object can come to bear a name because of, say, a baptism, but it may never get referred to by that name. (Rami argues that bearing a name is a ‘gruesomely gerrymandered relation’ (p. 88) of which no simple account may be provided.) The device of use-conditional meaning is then used for purposes for which competing accounts employ truth-conditional meaning: its most prominent use is in the account of how predicative uses of proper names are derived from their referential uses (p. 168–172). The book remains non-committal about the truth-conditional meaning of names (p. 119–128).

While the book does an excellent job of drawing fine-grained conceptual distinctions and devotes ample space in working out the formal details of the Use-conditional account, its treatment of some broader philosophical questions and conceptual issues at stake could have been richer. For instance, the book claims that proper names are primarily used to refer; but the force of ‘primary’ at issue is not made clear. Is the claim that proper names are most *frequently* used to refer? If so, then it is unlikely that competing views—e.g., Gray (2012) and Bach (2015)—contest the truth of this claim about frequency (which must be verified by empirical corpus studies, instead of philosophical analysis.) Perhaps the notion of primary is grounded in some notion of *derivability* of one word type from another (such that the non-referential uses of names are claimed to be derivable from referential uses, but not vice versa.) If so, then the argument that the book provides is not sufficient: while an explanation for how non-referential uses are derived from referential uses is provided, the book does

not provide a balance of considerations reasoning vis-à-vis analogous arguments that argue for the opposite conclusion (e.g., Gray (2018).)

Another issue is that the notion of a ‘name’ that the book assumes is too broad to be tenable. Irrespective of issues surrounding the semantics of names, it is plausible that there exists an independent practice of using an object to refer to another related object. The teacher asks, ‘What is your favourite animal?’, the students respond by raising a picture of their favourite animal. It is also plausible that some such objects (thus used to refer) will be linguistic expressions, e.g., someone’s social security number or a word they repeat very often may be used to refer to them. Therefore, some referential uses of words must be thought to be a part of our more general referential practices and not uses of *names*. Indeed, a feature of names that distinguishes them from other singular terms is that a word counts as a name only if it has been (more or less permanently) assigned to an individual. By treating proper names as a residual class of singular terms (such that any singular term that is not a definite description, pronoun, indexical, or demonstrative must be a name) the book ignores perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of names.

Finally, as a general methodological point one must draw a distinction between an investigation of natural language while assuming—as Russell and Frege did—that it is a corrupt form of a regimented logical system versus an investigation that treats such systems as tools for modelling (to various degrees of approximation) the rich and complex features of natural language as it is used by ordinary speakers. The book is pitched as an investigation into the nature of names as they are ordinarily used, but it does not always follow the methodology warranted for such investigation. Questions about the linguistic nature of names are often posed and answered—particularly in Chaps. 1 and 7—under the assumption that names may adequately be represented as individual constants. For instance, the notion of rigidity, and the distinctions between four different kinds of rigidity, are explicitly defined for individual constants within a specific formal semantic framework. This makes it difficult to escape the impression that these notions are not applicable to names as they are ordinarily used and that their applicability must be limited to a view of natural languages that takes them to have an underlying form suggested by the framework.

I take the overall merit of the work to lie in two things. The first is its encyclopaedic character: it is the first comprehensive analysis of the different kinds of name-uses (and the semantic proposals that aim to explain them) in a single book in the past two decades. Second, the book is a remarkable attempt at defending a version of the Millian orthodoxy while also keeping to the broader dialectic that has moved away from treating names as exclusive devices of reference to treating them as words with wide ranging morphological, phonological, and lexical features.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by Central European University Private University

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License,

which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Bach, K. (2015). The Predicate View of Proper Names. *Philosophy Compass*, 10(11), 772–784. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12261>
- Burge, T. (1973). Reference and Proper Names. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 70(14), 425–439. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2025107>
- Elbourne, P. (2005). *Situations and Individuals*. MIT Press
- Fara, D. G. (2015). Names Are Predicates. *The Philosophical Review*, 124(1), 59–117. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-2812660>
- Geurts, B. (1997). Good News about the Description Theory of Names. *Journal of Semantics*, 14(4), 319–348. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jos/14.4.319>
- Gray, A. (2012). *Names and name-bearing: An essay on the predicate view of names*. Dissertation, The University of Chicago
- Gray, A. (2018). Lexical-rule predicativism about names. *Synthese*, 195(12), 5549–5569. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1462-4>
- Kripke, S. A. (1980). *Naming and Necessity*. Harvard University Press
- Marcus, R. B. (1961). Modalities and Intensional Languages. *Synthese*, 13(4), 303–322. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00486629>
- Rami, D. (2014). The use-conditional indexical conception of proper names. *Philosophical Studies*, 168(1), 119–150. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-013-0264-x>
- Sainsbury, M. (2005). Reference without Referents. In *Reference without Referents*. Oxford University Press. <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/0199241805.001.0001/acprof-9780199241804>
- Schoubye, A. J. (2017). Type-Ambiguous Names. *Mind*, 126(503), 715–767. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzv188>
- Schoubye, A. J. (2020). Names Are Variables. *The Philosophical Review*, 129(1), 53–94. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-7890468>

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.