

Kripke: The Rejection of Descriptivism

1. **Saul Kripke** (1940-): Philosopher, logician, and mathematician. Kripke is nearly universally acknowledged as one of the foremost living philosophers. You have read excerpts from his most seminal work, a series of lectures given in 1970, transcribed and published as *Naming and Necessity*. That work is extraordinarily rich, but we will be focusing our attention on just two parts of it: (i) the arguments against the idea that proper names in ordinary language are disguised definite descriptions, and (ii) Kripke's suggested replacement: the *causal-historical theory of reference*.

2. Descriptivism:

Recall what I called *Descriptivism*:

Descriptivism proper names in natural language are disguised definite descriptions.

Descriptivism makes available simple, compelling solutions to versions of Russell's three puzzles that involve proper names. If we buy Russell's claims concerning acquaintance and denoting, it provides a simple and compelling solution to the question of the semantic bond for proper names.

Kripke's thesis: Descriptivism is false:

It would be nice to answer all of these arguments [in favor of Descriptivism]. I am not entirely able to see my way clear through every problem of this sort that can be raised. [...] Nevertheless, I think it's pretty certain that the view of Frege and Russell is false. (p. 29 of Kripke (1980))

3. Descriptivism I: associated descriptions:

Which description does a given proper name abbreviate? The description given by the descriptive conditions **associated with the name**.

Which descriptive conditions are associated with the name. The official definition:

(1) To every name or designating expression "X," there corresponds a cluster of properties, namely the family of those properties ϕ such that [the user] believes ϕX .

(2) One of the properties, or some conjointly, are believed by A to pick out some individual uniquely. (294)

Association The description associated by a speaker with a name N is 'the individual who possesses most of the properties F , such that the speaker believes " N is F ".'

EXAMPLE: Think of all of the properties you would mention to fill in the blank:

(1) Aristotle is _____.

Make a list, call it your ‘*Aristotle*’ list, of all of them. Suppose your ‘*Aristotle*’ list contains the properties F_1, F_2, \dots . Then the description associated with your use of ‘*Aristotle*’ is:

- (2) The individual with most of: F_1, F_2, \dots

4. Descriptivism II: The theory of reference

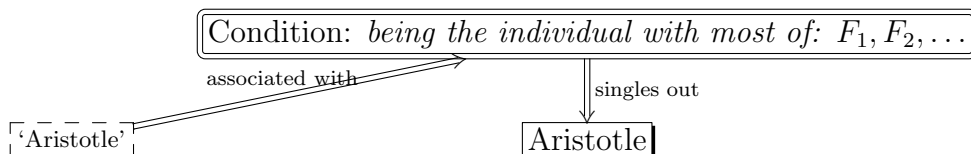
(3) If most, or a weighted most, of the ϕ 's are satisfied by one unique object y , then y is the referent of [the name] “ X ”.

(4) If the vote yields no unique objects, “ X ” does not refer.

(294)

Reference N refers to whatever individual is denoted by the description associated with N by its speaker.

The Fregean triangle again:



5. Descriptivism III: A Priority

(5) The statement, “If X exists, then X has most of the ϕ 's” is known a priori by the speaker.

Suppose: F_1, F_2, \dots are the properties on your ‘*Aristotle*’ list. According to Descriptivism, ‘*Aristotle*’ is a disguise for the definite description,

- (3) the individual who has most of: F_1, F_2, \dots

Now, consider,

- (4) If Aristotle exists, then Aristotle has most of: F_1, F_2, \dots

On Descriptivism, (4) is a disguise for

- (5) If the individual who has most of: F_1, F_2, \dots exists, then the individual who has most of: F_1, F_2, \dots has most of: F_1, F_2, \dots

which has the form

- (6) If the G exists, then the G is G .

This you know *a priori*.

Here’s a slightly simplified version:

A Priority The speaker knows *a priori* that N refers to whatever its associated description singles out (if there is such a thing).

6. Descriptivism IV: Necessity

(6) The statement, “If X exists, then X has most of the ϕ 's” expresses a necessary truth (in the idiolect of the speaker).

As noted above, Descriptivism requires that (4) is a disguise for (5). Notice that (5) not only happens to be true, but had to have been true. That is, (5) is a necessary truth. Since (4) is just a disguise for (5), (4) is also a necessary truth.

Slightly simplified version:

Necessity it is impossible that N refers to something not singled out by its associated description (if there is such a thing).

7. Kripke's Objections I: The Modal Argument

It just is not, in any intuitive sense of necessity, a necessary truth that Aristotle had the properties commonly attributed to him. There is a certain theory, perhaps popular in some views of the philosophy of history, which might both be deterministic and yet at the same time assign a great role to the individual in history. Perhaps Carlyle would associate with the meaning of the name of a great man his achievements. According to such a view it will be necessary, once a certain individual is born, that he is destined to perform various great tasks and so it will be part of the very nature of Aristotle that he should have produced ideas which had a great influence on the western world. Whatever the merit of such a view may be as a view of history or the nature of great men, it does not seem that it should be trivially true on the basis of a theory of proper names. It would seem that it's a contingent fact that Aristotle ever did *any* of the things commonly attributed to him today, *any* of these great achievements that we so admire. (295-6)

BLACKBOARD: Cartoon of actual world and possible alternative.

Argument:

- (a) (Necessity) is false; for instance, it is possible for 'Aristotle' to refer to something not singled out by its associated description.
- (b) Descriptivism is committed to (Necessity).

(c) So, Descriptivism is false.

How to respond? Descriptivists have suggested in effect that premise (7b) is false: there are variations on Descriptivism that don't require (Necessity).

8. Kripke's Objections II: The Epistemic Argument

What is the description we associate with 'Gödel'?

A plausible answer: "the individual who proved such-and-such a theorem."

The Gödel-Schmidt case:

Imagine the following blatantly fictional situation. (I hope Professor Gödel is not present.) Suppose that Gödel was not in fact the author of [a certain theorem]. A man named “Schmidt,” whose body was found in Vienna under mysterious circumstances many years ago, actually did the work in question. His friend Gödel somehow got hold of the manuscript and it was thereafter attributed to Gödel. (p. 298)

(A Priority)’s truth requires that you know *a priori* that this story is not true. Grant that you know it’s not true. The question is, *how?* Do you know it’s not true *just by thinking?* Kripke argues that you don’t. You know it’s not true because you know something about how the world works: people don’t kill for credit for a theorem; cover-ups of this sort never work, *etc.* This is *a posteriori* knowledge.

BLACKBOARD: put up the cartoon with a fictional situation.

Argument:

- (a) (A Priority) is false; for instance, you do not know *a priori* that ‘Gödel’ refers to something singled out by its associated description.
- (b) Descriptivism is committed to (A Priority).

(c) So, Descriptivism is false.

9. Kripke’s Objections III: The Semantic Argument

Suppose the Gödel-Schmidt story is true. Is this a situation in which ‘Gödel’ refers to the prover, or to the imposter? The answer seems to be: it’s a situation in which ‘Gödel’ refers to the imposter.

Other cases:

Very often we use a name on the basis of considerable misinformation. . . . What do we know about Peano? What many people in this room may “know” about Peano is that he was the discoverer of certain axioms which characterize the sequence of natural numbers, to so-called “Peano axioms.” Probably some people can even state them. I have been told that these axioms were not first discovered by Peano but by Dedekind. . . . So on the theory in question the term “Peano,” as we use it, really refers to – now that you’ve heard it you see that you were really all the time talking about – Dedekind. But you were not. (298)

Even worse misconceptions, of course, occur to the layman. . . . Columbus was the first man to realize that the earth was round. He was also the first European to land in the western hemisphere. Probably none of these things are true, and therefore, when people use the term “Columbus” they really refer to some Greek if they use the roundness of the earth, or to some Norseman, perhaps, if they use the “discovery of America.” But they don’t. (298)

The idea: it is possible to be *thoroughly misinformed* about the referents of one’s names.

Other Examples:

- **Popular Misconceptions:** Einstein, Columbus, Peano,
- **Legends:** Jonas, Moses, Robin Hood, King Arthur
- **Hoaxes:** Saddam Hussein and his body double.

The Argument from Misinformation:

- (a) (Reference) is false; for instance, ‘Peano’ in fact refers to an Italian mathematician, even though the individual singled out by its associated description is not Italian.
- (b) Descriptivism is committed to (Reference).

(c) So, Descriptivism is false.

10. Kripke’s Objections IV: The Empirical Inadequacy of Descriptivism

It seems, in some a priori way, that [speakers have to associate enough information with the names they use to single out an intended referent], because if you don’t think that the properties you have in mind pick out anyone uniquely – let’s say they’re all satisfied by two people – then how can you say which one of them you’re talking about? . . . usually the properties in question are supposed to be some famous deeds of the person in question. For example, Cicero was the man who denounced Catiline. The average person, according to [Descriptivism], when he refers to Cicero, is saying something like “the man who denounced Catiline” and thus has picked out a certain man uniquely. It is a tribute to the education of philosophers that they have held this thesis for such a long time. In fact, most people, when they think of Cicero, just think of a *famous Roman orator*, without any pretension to think either that there was only one famous Roman orator or that one must know something else about Cicero to have a referent for the name. (297)

The idea: it's *just false* that we associate enough information with 'Cicero' to single anyone out.

Consider the following true story:

- (7) I have this friend Paul from high school. Paul lives in the Bay Area. Paul and I connected a few years ago via a social networking website.

BLACKBOARD: compile your 'Paul'-list.

NOTE: From the information in the story and what you know about me you might draw some conclusions about Paul:

- (8) Paul is a man.
(9) Paul is middle-aged's.
(10) Paul is middle class.

(8) and (9) are true. I believe that (10) is false: Paul's wife is a high-level executive at Intel, I think. Your conclusions are true (or false) because you name refers to a certain man, and that man has (or lacks) the features in question.

Look at your 'Paul'-list. You'll find that the information on there does not single anyone out.

AN INADEQUATE DESCRIPTIVIST RESPONSE: *being the referent of 'Paul'* should be on your 'Paul' list!

KRIPKE'S REPLY:

(C) For any successful theory, the account [of reference] must not be circular. The properties which are used in the vote must not themselves involve the notion of reference in such a way that it is ultimately impossible to eliminate. (294)
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The idea: Descriptivism is *an account of reference*: an answer to the question

The Problem of Intentionality: In virtue of what does a particular word or phrase refer to a particular thing?

So Descriptivism is supposed to explain what it is in virtue of which something is the referent of 'Paul'. That individual's *being the referent of 'Paul'* cannot, on pain of circularity, explain its being the referent of 'Paul'.

BLACKBOARD: Paul-'Paul' cartoon.

11. The Causal-Historical Theory of Reference:

Someone ... is born; his parents call him by a certain name. They talk about him to their friends. Other people meet him. Through various sorts of talk the name is spread from link to link as if by a chain. ... A certain passage of communication reading ultimately to the man [Feynman] himself does reach the speaker. [The speaker] is then referring to Feynman even though he can't identify him uniquely. (299)

BLACKBOARD: the causal chain cartoon.

Two kinds of name uses

- **original use** (rare) [aka ‘baptism’, ‘dubbing’]: reference is explained by ostension, or description.
- **derived use** (common): the referent is: the thing referred to by the original use of the name at the end of the chain of transmission.

NOTE: *It does not matter what you think:*

On our view, it is not how the speaker thinks he got the reference, but the actual chain of communication, which is relevant. (299)

The notion of a historical chain of acquisition by which a name is passed from user to user, was first used to facilitate abandonment of the classical description theory of proper names found in Frege and Russell. The notion of a historical chain does this by offering ... an explanation [or reference] that does not require that the mechanism of reference is already in the head of the local user in the form of a self-assigned description. In determining the referent of the name “Aristotle”, we need not look to the biography’s *text*, instead we look to its *bibliography*. (Kaplan, “Afterthoughts,” §IV, 602-3)

How can you be *utterly misinformed*, but still be talking about the right thing? By being on the receiving end of a misinforming chain of transmission.

12. **The Madagascar Problem:**

DEFINITION: A chain of use-transmission is *reference-preserving* iff derived uses of the name refer to the same thing as the original use.

There are ways of transmitting a name that are not reference-preserving:

When the name is “passed from link to link,” the receiver must, I think, intend when he learns it to use it with the same reference as the [person] from whom he heard it. If I hear the name “Napoleon” and decide it would be a nice name for my pet aardvark, I do not satisfy this condition. (300)

Louis deRosset – Spring 2024

BLACKBOARD: use-transmission failure cartoon.

QUESTION: Under what conditions is the transmission of the use of a name *reference-preserving*?

There may be a causal chain from our use of the term “Santa Claus” to a certain historical saint, but still the children, when they use this, by this time probably do not refer to that saint. (299)

NOTE: this may be a chain of transmission that meets the requirement Kripke lays out above. This case suffers from the fact that there may have been a merging of various myths and make-believe. The standard case is ‘Madagascar’.

BLACKBOARD: draw the Madagascar cartoon.