The Semantic Argument

1. **A consequence of any form of Descriptivism**:

   (**CONSEQUENCE**) If a speaker S associates a condition C with a name N and C singles out some individual x, then S's use of N refers to x.

   This consequence follows from the claim that a name refers to an individual in virtue of being associated by its user with a condition which singles that individual out.

2. **Famous deeds again**:
   On the Little Lecture account of association, this means that proper names of famous dead people refer to them in virtue of the fact that the famous deeds associated by speakers with their names are deeds they really did. Thus, Joe's use of 'Columbus' refers to a certain individual only if (most of) the information Joe offers in response to the question, 'To whom or what do you refer by your use of 'Columbus'?', is true. That is, the sentence (as uttered by Joe)
   (1)   Columbus did most of: D_1, D_2, ...
   is true.

3. **News Flash: People are misinformed!**:
   The problem is that, for many names of famous people, most speakers are ***massively misinformed***: almost everything they believe about that individual is just wrong.

4. **Three examples (one blatantly fictional, one real, one slightly fictional)**:

   (a) **Gödel-Schmidt again**:

   > [Suppose Kripke's blatant Gödel-Schmidt fiction is true]. On the view in question, then, when our ordinary man uses the name 'Gödel', he really means to refer to Schmidt, because Schmidt is the unique person satisfying the description, 'the man who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic'. [...] So, since the mean who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic is in fact Schmidt, we, when we talk about 'Gödel', are in fact always referring to Schmidt. But it seems to me that we are not. We simply are not. (p. 84)

(b) **Columbus**:

> [It is commonly thought that] 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'[, at least on any of the versions of Descriptivism we have considered so far]. But they don't.

(c) **Vanilli**: The only information someone might associate with the name 'Vanilli' is, that he *sang the song 'Girl You Know It's True'*.

5. **The Semantic Argument**: It is possible to use a name like 'Vanilli' to refer to a person even though one is massively misinformed about that person: all the information that one has about Vanilli ("he sang the song 'Girl You Know It's True'") that might single him out is wrong, and the information is true instead of some other individual. But any form of Descriptivism we have discussed, when wedded to the Little Lecture account of association, requires that your use of the name refers to the individual your information fits best: the individual singled out by the conditions you express in your little lecture is the individual to whom your use of the name refers. So any such form of Descriptivism is false.

6. **False comfort**:
If Descriptivism were true, then speakers could never be completely wrong about the referents of their names. Thus, we would have a transcendental deduction of the impossibility of completely successful disinformation campaigns. Vanilli could never get famous by stealing credit for the accomplishments of someone else, because the fame would belong to that other person (under the name 'Vanilli', of course.) Unfortunately for us, and, perhaps, fortunately for Vanilli, people really can be massively wrong.

7. **Does Appeal to Common Opinion Help?**:
Perhaps the Descriptivist might repond as follows: Ordinary

speakers would not respond to the Little Lecture prompt so confidently. Instead (under ideal circumstances), they would respond:

(2) By 'Vanilli' I refer to the individual of whom it is commonly thought that he sang 'Girl You Know It's True'.

Three Problems: There are at least three problems with this response, both stemming from the dependence of reference on who happens to be around and what their opinions are.

(a) **Circularity Problems**:

> If we did that [*i.e.* appealed to common opinion] we would run in a circle. Here we are all in this room.[...] All of us in the community are trying to determine the reference by saying 'Gödel is to be the man to whom the incompleteness of arithmetic is commonly attributed'. None of this will get us started with any attribution unless there is some independent criterion for the reference of the name other than 'the man to whom the incompleteness of arithmetic is commonly attributed'. Otherwise, all we will be saying is, 'We attribute this ahievement to the man to whom we attribute it', without saying who that man is, without giving any independent criterion of the reference, and so the determination will be circular. (p. 89)

Kripke is wondering about the case in which we are *all* ordinary speakers. If we *all* appeal to common opinion, then none of us has any independent means of referring to anybody. The moral: If you defend Descriptivism by appeal to common opinion, you had better hope that the response (2) is not very common. More seriously, in such a case, the Descriptivist has no answer to the Question of the Semantic Bond, unless people commonly have some independent means of referring to the relevant individual.

(b) **Reference Doesn't Switch**:

It *used* to be commonly attributed to Columbus that he was the first European to get to America. Now we commonly attribute that to some Norseman. But suppose that Rip van Winkle has been left out of the loop on the historical research (though he's awake and re-integrated back into our community). The referent of his use of 'Columbus' has not switched while he was sleeping.

(c) **The Case of the Lonely Dupe**:
Suppose that Billy is tricked by Juana, who deliberately misinforms him about Vanilli. Juana (and everyone else in the world) know very well that Vanilli did not sing 'Girl You Know It's True'. Billy, our lonely dupe, has been duped: When he says,

(3) Vanilli sang 'Girl You Know It's True'

what he says is false. But, if the appeal to common opinion were correct, then what he says would be true: it would just be a truth about the real singer.

8. **A Two-Pronged Response**:
A Descriptivist might divide "ordinary users" of 'Vanilli' into two types, and respond to the semantic argument in different ways for different users:

(a) **The Confident**: There are some people who consider themselves experts on the history of cheesy late-80's pop. They take their little lectures to be authoritative, and, if it turns out that the information in their lecture does not fit the person they originally had in mind, then they are willing to bite the bullet: 'Vanilli' does not fit the person they originally had in mind, and (4) turns out to be true. The Descriptivist can bite the bullet here, claiming that the self-professed experts are ***right***.

(b) **The Humble**: The rest of us are suitably humble about our expertise regarding cheesy late-80's pop. If pressed, we will admit to our lack of expertise. Let's imagine a stark case in which The Confident and The Humble confront one another. (I'm shamelessley stealing a case from a former student.) Suppose that Peter is a self-professed expert on cheesy 80's pop. He starts telling Jen about Vanilli. He starts off by saying:

(4) Vanilli was a pop star famous in the late 80's and early 90's.

Suppose he's cut off right there (tackled by a Vanilli fan, say). Jen is left without enough information to single out Vanilli: her information does not distinguish Vanilli from Paula Abdul or Vanilla Ice, for instance. Now suppose someone prompts her by asking, 'To whom or what do you

refer by your use of 'Vanilli'?'

What should she say? Here's one thing it's plausible to think she might say:

(5) By my use of 'Vanilli' I refer to the individual to whom Peter refers by his use of 'Vanilli'.

This is called *deference*: Jen is deferring to Peter: she lets the reference of her use of 'Vanilli' be guided by what he associates with his use of the same name.

[**BLACKBOARD**]: draw the chained-reference cartoon: Jen: "the referent of Peter's use of 'Vanilli'" Peter: "the original recipient of the Best New Artist Grammy in 1990."

9. **Assessing the Two-Pronged Response**:
I want to concentrate for the moment on the response in the case of The Confident. The response strikes me as completely implausible. To some defenders of Descriptivism, however, (and even to some of my colleagues who don't have a dog in this fight) it does not seem inplausible. Perhaps the argument is at an impasse here.

I think, however, that I can explain what might seem attractive about insisting that The Confident cannot be massively mis-informed. When someone starts saying a bunch of things us-ing, *e.g.*, the name 'Columbus' that seem spectacularly wrong, we typically take this to be evidence that the person is using 'Columbus' differently than we are. For instance, if someone says in all seriousness:

(6) Prince always splatters me with water when he shakes his coat out

, we do not take him to be talking about His Royal Badness. This is because we typically assume that speakers are not mas-sively misinformed about the things they are talking about. Perhaps this might be taken to require that speakers never are (and indeed cannot be) massively misinformed about the things they are talking about.

But it shouldn't. Just because we typically assume that speak-ers are not massively misinformed does not mean that it never happens (much less that it can't happen). We typically as-sume that the people we are talking to are not serial killers. We typically assume that leaders of nations do not wish to ex-

terminate large segments of those nations' populations. Still (unfortunately), it happens.

The Semantic Argument

1. **A consequence of any form of Descriptivism**

   (CONSEQUENCE) If a speaker S associates a condition C with a name N and C singles out some individual x, then S's use of N refers to x.

2. **Famous deeds again**
   (1)   Columbus did most of: D_1, D_2, ...

3. **News Flash: People are misinformed!**:
   For many names of famous people, most speakers are ***massively misinformed***: almost everything they believe about that individual is just wrong.

4. **Three examples (one blatantly fictional, one real, one slightly fictional)**:

   (a) **Gödel-Schmidt again**

   > [Suppose Kripke's blatant Gödel-Schmidt fiction is true]. On the view in question, then, when our ordinary man uses the name 'Gödel', he really means to refer to Schmidt, because Schmidt is the unique person satisfying the description, 'the man who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic'. [...] So, since the mean who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic is in fact Schmidt, we, when we talk about 'Gödel', are in fact always referring to Schmidt. But it seems to me that we are not. We simply are not. (p. 84)

   (b) **Columbus**

   > [It is commonly thought that] 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'[, at least on any of the versions of Descriptivism we have considered so far]. But they don't.

   (c) **Vanilli**
   The only information someone might associate with the name 'Vanilli' is, that he *sang the song 'Girl You Know It's True'*.

5. **The Semantic Argument**
   It is possible to use a name like 'Vanilli' to refer to a person even though one is massively misinformed about that person: all the information that one has about Vanilli ("he sang the song 'Girl You Know It's True'") that

might single him out is wrong, and the information is true instead of some other individual. But any form of Descriptivism we have discussed, when wedded to the Little Lecture account of association, requires that your use of the name refers to the individual your information fits best: the individual singled out by the conditions you express in your little lecture is the individual to whom your use of the name refers. So any such form of Descriptivism is false.

6. **False comfort**:
   If Descriptivism were true, then speakers could never be completely wrong about the referents of their names.

7. **Does Appeal to Common Opinion Help?**:
   (2)   By 'Vanilli' I refer to the individual of whom it is commonly
         thought that he sang 'Girl You Know It's True'.
   Three Problems

   (a) **Circularity Problems**

   > If we did that [*i.e.* appealed to common opinion] we would run in a circle. Here we are all in this room.[. . .] All of us in the community are trying to determine the reference by saying 'Gödel is to be the man to whom the incompleteness of arithmetic is commonly attributed'. None of this will get us started with any attribution unless there is some independent criterion for the reference of the name other than 'the man to whom the incompleteness of arithmetic is commonly attributed'. Otherwise, all we will be saying is, 'We attribute this ahievement to the man to whom we attribute it', without saying who that man is, without giving any independent criterion of the reference, and so the determination will be circular. (p. 89)

   (b) **Reference Doesn't Switch**

   (c) **The Case of the Lonely Dupe**
       (3)   Vanilli sang 'Girl You Know It's True'

8. **A Two-Pronged Response**

   (a) **The Confident**
       The Descriptivist can bite the bullet here, claiming that self-professed experts are ***right***.

   (b) **The Humble**   (4)   Vanilli was a pop star famous in the late 80's and early 90's.
       (5)   By my use of 'Vanilli' I refer to the individual to whom Peter
             refers by his use of 'Vanilli'.

9. **Assessing the Two-Pronged Response**
   (6)   Prince always splatters me with water when he shakes his coat
         out