

The Problem of the Semantic Bond

1. **FACT:** You use the name ‘Aristotle’ to refer to a certain individual. That individual is the *referent* of your use of that name.

(**DEFINITION**) x is the *referent* of a name ‘ N ’ iff ‘ N ’ refers to x .

For instance, something is the referent of ‘Aristotle’ iff ‘Aristotle’ refers to that individual. Consider

- (1) Aristotle liked dogs.

This sentence is true iff a certain individual had a fondness for dogs. Which individual? The referent of ‘Aristotle’, of course! That individual and only that individual is relevant to the truth of your sentence. That man’s brother’s and father’s degree of attachment to dogs is irrelevant. Plato’s fondness for dogs, irrelevant.

2. **AN UPSHOT:** “Reference transmits influence.” Your reference to Aristotle in (1) means that how you are now is affected by how a certain man, the referent of ‘Aristotle’, was a long time ago. In particular, you’ve said something *true* if that individual liked dogs, and *false* otherwise. It might even determine your grade on an exam!
3. You are affected by Aristotle because your use of a certain name – ‘Aristotle’ – refers to that person. It’s as if a little wire connects your name to the great, dead philosopher, in virtue of which how that person was then affects how you are, now. There is no wire, however; that’s obviously just a bit of illustrative metaphor.
4. Being the referent of ‘Aristotle’ is a pretty rare distinction. Considering only human beings, there are at least 6 billion other candidates, and only one person gets to be the referent. And don’t get me started on other kinds of candidates (electrons, real numbers, *etc.*)

5. TERMINOLOGY: We'll call the mechanism which attaches a name to its referent ***the semantic bond***.

6. **The Question of the Semantic Bond:** In virtue of what does your use of 'Aristotle' refer to a certain particular man?

(Why not his brother or his dad? What difference between he and all of the other individuals in the universe makes it so that **he** is the referent?) We are looking for a specification of a kind of mechanism (like a wire) whose operation links the use of a name with its referent.

Here's how Kripke puts it:

"The basic problem for any view such as Mill's is how we can determine what the referent of a name, as used by a given speaker, is. [...] [H]ow do people ever use names to refer to things at all? Well, they may be in a position to point to some things and thus determine the references of certain names ostensively. [...] But of course ordinary names refer to all sorts of people, like Walter Scott [or Aristotle!], to whom we can't possibly point." (pp. 27-8)

[TERMINOLOGY: "ostension" means *pointing*. If you *ostend* something, that just means that you point at it. If the reference of a proper name in your mouth is determined "ostensively," that just means that it is determined *by pointing*.]

7. **Does pointing help?:** It's not obvious that pointing helps, for a version of the question still arises *even when you point*. Suppose you live next to Birnam Wood, and you utter

(2) Birnam Wood is pretty.

while pointing to Birnam Wood. There are still lots of candidates for reference: you've got to separate the forest you are pointing at from the trees, for instance. Even if you always made sure you were near Birnam Wood in case you needed to say something about it, you would still face the question of what makes it the case that Birnam Wood, rather than this or that tree, is the referent of your use of 'Birnam Wood'.

Imagine that everything with a name in English had a name

tag. Would you be able to tell, just by reading the name tag, what the referent of the name was?

8. **PUZZLES:** We hope that an answer to the question of the semantic bond will help answer the following puzzles.

- (a) **The parrot vs. the child:** The parrot utterance does not refer to Aristotle, the human child's does. What's the difference between them?
- (b) **Newman1:** The referent need not be a past or presently existing object. David Kaplan introduced 'Newman1' as a name for the first child born in the 22nd century. He boldly predicted:

(3) Newman1 will be a Pacific Islander, and a female.

Now there's a "wire" connecting him to the future! What sort of mechanism could transmit "influence" from the 22nd century to the 21st?

- (c) **Objects outside our light-cone:** The mechanism might connect us with entities which cannot causally influence us (according to our best current physics). I hereby introduce the name 'Pulserificus' for the pulsar whose signal first reaches the Earth after midnight GMT, December 31, 2031. Now consider:

(4) Pulserificus is smaller than the sun.

This sentence is true! But there can't be causal influence outside of our light cone (according to Einstein). What sort of mechanism can transmit "influence" faster than the speed of light?

- (d) **Reference-Switching:** 'Santa Claus' used to refer to a certain bishop of Myra. Now it doesn't. What happened to effect the switch?

[**NOTICE:** this is independent of the fact that there is no such thing as Santa Claus. The same phenomenon happened with 'Madagascar', and 'villain.']

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(**DEFINITION**) x is *the referent* of a name ‘ N ’ iff ‘ N ’ refers to x .

- (1) Aristotle liked dogs.

2. **AN UPSHOT:** “Reference transmits influence.”

3. **The semantic bond:** the mechanism by which a word is attached to a particular individual as its referent.

4. **The Question of the Semantic Bond:** In virtue of what does your use of ‘Aristotle’ refer to a certain particular man?

“The basic problem for any view such as Mill’s is how we can determine what the referent of a name, as used by a given speaker, is. [...] [H]ow do people ever use names to refer to things at all? Well, they may be in a position to point to some things and thus determine the references of certain names ostensively. [...] But of course ordinary names refer to all sorts of people, like Walter Scott [or Aristotle!], to whom we can’t possibly point.”
(pp. 27-8)

5. **Does pointing help?**

- (2) Birnam Wood is pretty.

6. **PUZZLES:**

- (a) **The parrot vs. the child**

- (b) **Newman1**

David Kaplan: “I shall use ‘Newman1’ as a name for the first child born in the 22nd century.”

- (3) Newman1 will be a Pacific Islander, and a female.

- (c) **Objects outside our light-cone**

Me: “I hereby introduce the name ‘Pulserificus’ for the pulsar whose signal first reaches the Earth after midnight, December 31, 2029.”

- (4) Pulserificus is smaller than the sun.

- (d) **Reference-Switching:** ‘Santa Claus’ switched reference. What happened to effect the switch?