

Handout 7

Against descriptivism: Kripke

THE CLUSTER THEORY. Descriptivism attributes to each proper name a set of descriptions. But different speakers may associate different descriptions with every given name. What is more, some of these descriptions are clearly not essential to the use of the name. I may believe that Aristotle was born in Stagira. You tell me he was born in Athens. Even though I previously associated the description ‘born in Stagira’ with the name ‘Aristotle’, I am not inclined to say now that ‘Aristotle’ does not refer, or that Aristotle did not exist.

31, 61ff

Thus, the proposal is to associate with each name a cluster of descriptions, such that only the properties constituting the identity of the bearer will be included in the cluster. But what are those properties? With ‘Aristotle’, one candidate would be the property of being a man. Whether or not it is an essential one, or whether it is immune to error, is a complicated issue. Yet, in any event, it is not sufficient to differentiate Aristotle from other human individuals, or alternatively, to differentiate the name ‘Aristotle’ from the name ‘Plato’. The cluster must contain, therefore, descriptions that would identify the bearer in the multitude of other individuals. Only then the cluster would explain why the name ‘NN’ refers to the individual NN, or why the speakers using the name ‘NN’ are able to refer exactly to NN, rather than anyone else.

Kripke levels several objections against the view just outlined. Before we examine them, let us follow his discussion that touches on some fundamental issues (not all of them are directly related to the theory of names).

Remark 1. Wittgenstein is interpreted as an early proponent of the cluster theory. It is not clear, even from the Moses passage cited, that there is any truth in this.

31

FIXING SENSE AND FIXING REFERENCE. Descriptivism can be split into two views. One is the view that descriptions fix the sense of a name. If the meaning of ‘NN’ is exhausted by a set $\{d_1, \dots, d_n\}$ of descriptions, then we let D be a complex description ‘the thing of which the claims “It is d_1 ”, ..., “It is d_n ” are true’. In this case the statement:

32

NN is F (7-1)

should be analysed as a statement:

D is F . (7-2)

But if descriptivism is meant to account for the fixation of reference, then the first statement is not to be analysed as (need not be synonymous with) the second one.

ONE METER IN PARIS. Kripke has easier time refuting the claim that descriptions fix the meaning of the name. And that may well be because no-one, neither Frege, nor Russell, held that view. In any case, he has more trouble with the claim that descriptions are used to fix the reference. Consider the one meter example. Suppose there is a stipulation:

54

One meter equals the length of the Paris bar at t_0 . (7-3)

Question 2. What is the logical form of the statement (7-3)?

In this case we do not claim that the expression ‘one meter’ means the length of the Paris bar, that one is synonymous with the other. Someone who is using ‘one meter’ competently might be totally unaware of the stipulation. So the statement (7-3) is not *analytic*. But is it *a priori*? Well, it seems so. We did not rely on any empirical data to make the stipulation. We did not *discover* it.

56

Now is the statement (7-3) necessary? If it is, then the expression ‘one meter’ is a rigid designator referring to the *same* length across possible situations. But that is not the case. The statement (7-3) is used to fix the reference by tying it rigidly to the *actual* length of S_0 , rather than its countfactual length(s). That is, we wish to say that the standard of length remains the same across possible situations, even if the Paris bar expands or shrinks in those situations.

56

MOSES. Let us apply the lessons just learned to the case of ordinary proper names. Consider ‘Moses’. If descriptivism is a theory of meaning fixation, then the statement:

58

Moses was born in Egypt (7-4)

is synonymous with the statement:

The man who did such and such things described in the Bible was born in Egypt. (7-5)

But this seems wrong. A man may not know what things exactly the Bible attributes to Moses. Nor might he know the very important details (as demanded by the cluster theory). He may only be able to attribute some *indefinite* descriptions to Moses ('Moses was one of the prophets', 'Moses was one of the people God spoke to' etc.). If we have 'bachelor' and 'unmarried man' as a paradigm of what meaning equivalence is, then ignorance of the important details of Moses' life according to the Bible does not disqualify the speaker from using and understanding the sentence (7-4).

Suppose now we take descriptivism as a theory of reference fixation. Here we compare the following statements:

Moses might have lived all his life in Iberia (7-6)

The man who did such and such things described in the Bible might have lived all his life in Iberia. (7-7)

We say: had Moses been born in Iberia, he would not have been able to do the things described in the Bible (Iberia and Egypt are too far away etc.). So *someone else*, presumably born in Egypt, would have done the job. So the statement (7-6) is unproblematically true, but the statement (7-7) is false: being born in Egypt is part of the job description for leading the Jews out of Egypt.

In more precise terms: the name 'Moses' and the description 'The man who did ϕ ' refer to the same individual in the actual world (let us assume). But in some other possible world, they refer to different individuals. 'Moses' refers there to the same individual as the one referred to in the actual world, whilst the description refers to someone else, or no one at all.

Question 3. Illustrate the distinction between meaning fixation and reference fixation with the statement 'Moses might not have existed.'

DESCRIPTIVE NAMES. Kripke is aware of the *possibility* of fixing the reference of a name with a description. His example is 'Jack the Ripper'. It is more convenient to work with an artificial, though not too fanciful, example. We can introduce the name 'Julius' to stand for the inventor of the zip. That is, we may use such 'descriptive name' to stand for whoever invented the zip. In the actual world, the inventor of the zip happens to be Whitcomb Judson (see Wikipedia). So Judson is Julius. But of course someone else could have invented the zip—for example, Thomas Alva Edison. So in another possible world, Edison is Julius, even though in that world Edison is still not Judson. Evidently, the name 'Julius' functions differently from the ordinary proper names such as 'Lenin' or indeed 'Edison': it is not a rigid designator.

A further interesting question is the logical status of the statements containing descriptive names. Consider the statement:

Julius is the inventor of the zip. (7-8)

Presumably I do not need to go to the archives and investigate whether Julius is indeed the one who invented the zip. I know the truth of this statement as soon as I master the use of the name 'Julius' (and of other parts of the statement). So it seems that I know its truth a priori. But the statement, by the argument just given, is not necessary. Hence, we have an counter-intuitive instance of a contingent a priori statement.

Remark 4. The Julius example is discussed in Gareth Evans, 'Reference and contingency'.

Remark 5. There *is* a sense in which the statement (7-8) is necessary. In order to understand it properly, we have to introduce additional conceptual machinery. We return to this issue later in our discussion of Stalnaker, 'Assertion'.

RIGIDIFIED DESCRIPTIONS. Just as we may have non-rigidly designating proper names, we may have rigidified descriptions. Consider the following:

The actual founder of the Soviet Union died in 1924. (7-9)

This statement is clearly a posteriori. But is it necessary or contingent? This is tricky to decide. You may argue that when we consider any possibility, we have already fixed how the facts actually are. That is why, for example, the following statement appears meaningful:

Lenin might have been taller than he actually was. (7-10)

Lenin's possible height is here compared to his actual height. It is understood that when we examine his height in a possible world, you do not consider that world as actual; otherwise (7-10) would be non-sensical. By the same logic, the description in (7-9) should refer to the same (actual) individual in every possible world.

