Handout 6

Descriptive names, the causal theory of reference: Kripke

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 is Judson. So Judson is Julius. But of course someone else could have invented the zip—for example, 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.

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

<div align="center">Julius is the inventor of the zip. (6-1)</div>

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

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

<div align="center">The actual founder of the Soviet Union died in 1924. (6-2)</div>

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:

<div align="center">Lenin might have been taller than he actually was. (6-3)</div>

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 (6-3) would be non-sensical. By the same logic, the description in (6-2) should refer to the same (actual) individual in every possible world.

THE CAUSAL THEORY OF REFERENCE. After criticising descriptivism Kripke proposes an alternative way of thinking about reference of proper names. He states his theory briefly and with hesitation, complaining about the possibility of it being false. Despite those caveats it is worth discussing it in detail, especially in the light of the ensuing debate. We call his view 'the causal theory of reference'. Several people vigorously opposed the mention of causality in this label. We shall, however, stick to it, whilst trying to clarify the precise role of causal relations.

BAPTISM AND TRANSMISSION. The account splits into: the account of the initial *baptism* and the account of the *transmission* of the name down the causal chain of name-users. Baptism involves descriptions. The name is attached to the object by a description interpreted in a wide sense: it may include verbal descriptions and demonstratives accompanied by ostension. We may have baptisms like:

<div align="center">Let this child [in front of me] be called 'Isaac' (6-4)</div>

or:

<div align="center">The man previously called 'Jacob' will now be called 'Israel'. (6-5)</div> *Gen.* 32:28

Baptism itself need not be of causal nature. We may baptise causally inert mathematical objects (such as the number π). Another important thing to notice is that the description need not be associated permanently with the name. It neither gives the meaning of the name, nor does it serve to determine

the name's reference. It may subsequently be forgotten or misstated. So the baptising description does not give the meaning of the name. Perhaps what we should add is that there must be an intention of using the name for the same object as before.

The same restriction applies to the use of the name by later users, those people who received the name from the baptiser(s). But the intention to use the name in the same mode must be understood in a very weak sense. It should not even be conscious. Perhaps a better way would be to say that there must be *no* intention of using the name to refer to a different object.

Later users must also recognise the expression 'NN' as belonging syntactically to the category of names. Again, although the introduction of the name into their idiolect may be accompanied by a description, this description need not be true or accurate. I may hear the name 'Stalin' from someone who told me:

> Stalin was the best friend of Soviet children. (6-6)

This is not a true statement (he was probably the worst). Yet I may subsequently use the name 'Stalin' to refer to Stalin, even though my information about him is inadequate.

DIRECT REFERENCE. Kripke is sometimes believed to have adopted the so-called 'direct reference view'. On this view, sentences that differ only by the substitution of one name by another name for the same object express the same proposition. If we add a plausible assumption that belief and knowledge are relations between persons and propositions, we may get implausible consequences.

Suppose the speaker knows that Stalin died in 1953. Since Stalin is Dzhugashvili, the proposition:

> Stalin died in 1953 (6-7)

should be the same as:

> Dzhugashvili died in 1953. (6-8)

Thus, on the direct reference account, our speaker should know the second proposition as well. And this is obviously not true of many speakers.

Question 2. Why should the speaker, who knows the proposition (6-7), should also know (6-8)?

On Kripke's causal view, there is no mystery. The two names, 'Stalin' and 'Dzhugashvili', are connected to the speaker through two different chains. If the speaker has been presented with the expression 'Dzhugashvili' and has recognised it as a proper name, then he is able to refer to Dzhugashvili. But the chain connecting him to Dzhugashvili (or to the first use of the name 'Dzhugashvili') is not the same as the chain connecting him to Stalin (or to the first use of the name 'Stalin').

Therefore, there is no *direct* reference, according to Kripke. Referring is still mediated by causal chains. Notice, however, that, although such a view provides a reference-fixing mechanism, it remains neutral on the issue of the meaning of proper names. Yet it seems as though we have to have *some* theory of meaning here: we have to explain how the meaning of 'Stalin' contributes to the meaning of the sentences (propositions) where it occurs.

YSB