Philosophy of Language // Spring 2020

Handout 6

Descriptivism and proper names: Kripke

Fictional objects. True to form, Kripke begins with a detour, covering a topic not addressed elsewhere in the book: fictional objects. It is worth giving it a brief thought. Unicorns, Kripke assumes, are creatures described in myths. They are mythical, or fictional, creatures. They do not *actually* exist. But presumably they *could have* existed. Suppose a future astronaut discovers on distant planet animals meeting all the descriptions associated with unicorns. Then you may have thought that those animals *are* unicorns. Kripke argues that those animals—'monocorns', you could call them—in fact would not be unicorns. Unicorns are fictional. Actual objects can resemble fictional objects, but no matter how closely they do so, they cannot be identified with them. 24

On the other hand, we speculate further, suppose that those writers who described unicorns were in fact describing an actual species (no matter whether extinct or not) that may usually be known under another name. Then of course unicorns are actual. If now another writer intending to write fiction describes a 'monocorn' that resembles in every crucial detail actual unicorns, then once again, monocorns and unicorns are distinct.

Millian names. Kripke's main concern is naming. He starts by mentioning Mill's view that names have *denotation*, but no *connotation*. 26

Example 1. One might think that the name 'Jackson' connotes that the bearer is a son of Jack. But many Jacksons are not sons of Jack. To say that they are not is not a contradiction. Hence, 'a son of Jack' cannot be the meaning of the name 'Jackson'. Hence the name 'Jackson' has no linguistic meaning. And in a way, this is intuitive: names are not part of the language, whose meaning can be located in a dictionary.

Mill's terminology of connotation and denotation is often (or at least, was) assimilated to Frege's distinction between sense and reference. Kripke apparently agrees. It is nevertheless vital to exercise care here. Frege's view is that, semantically, names are not compositional. You cannot derive the sense of a name from the sense of the letters or letter-parts it is made of. Those parts have no semantic content to begin with. This evidently clashes with the case in our Example . Secondly, the claim about 'connotation' does not separate the semantic and non-semantic aspects of meaning, such as tone. The name 'Babylon' may connote to me the many centuries of human history, but that is certainly not part of its sense, as understood by Frege.

Remark 2. Kripke ultimately will defend a view very close to Mill's view just outlined—namely, that names only have denotations.

Descriptivism outlined. The prevailing orthodoxy at the time of these lectures went against Mill. Hence Kripke continues by criticising that orthodoxy which he associates with Frege and Russell. Many scholars had subsequently cast doubt on the adequacy of Kripke's reading of Frege and Russell. Their doubts have great importance: e.g., we are going to see what Dummett has to say on Kripke's reading of Frege. However, we shall put them aside for now. We shall rather present the Frege–Russell view—to be labelled 'descriptivism'—as it emerges from *Naming and Necessity*. A convenient way to do that is to list different puzzles this view is able to solve. 28ff

Informative identities. We have seen earlier how Frege's distinction between sense and reference is animated by the concern over statements such as those: 28

(6-1)
Hesperus is Phosphorus.
Saint-Petersburg is Leningrad.
George Gordon is Lord Byron.
Lenin is Ulyanov.

All of them can be represented in the form of '$a = b$', where 'a' and 'b' are two distinct names. We are, therefore, dealing with identity statements. Now the question is what the meaning of a proper name is. Suppose the meaning of the name is exhausted by the individual it denotes. That is, its sole linguistic function, we suppose, lies in designating that individual. However, then, for example:

(6-2) Hesperus is Phosphorus

is a substantive astronomical discovery, whereas:

Hesperus is Hesperus

is not. But, on the other hand, those two statements have, by supposition, the same meaning. Similarly for other cases, where we shall have historical or geographical discoveries. Hence a paradox.

The way out, according to descriptivism, is to abandon the assumption that the meaning of a proper name is given by the individual it designates. Instead, with each name we associate a description. We may say that the meaning of the name 'Hesperus' is 'the brightest celestial object regularly seen near the western horizon after sunset' and the meaning of the name 'Phosphorus' is 'the brightest celestial object regularly seen near the eastern horizon before sunrise'. In this way we explain how the equivalence (6-2) may be informative. Its meaning will be given by:

(6-3) The brightest celestial object regularly seen near the western horizon after sunset is identical with the brightest celestial object regularly seen near the eastern horizon before sunrise.

LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE. There is, it seems, another motivation to insist on associating names with descriptions. We need to give an account of the speakers' competence to use names to refer to specific individuals. Ivan uses the name 'Lenin' to refer to Lenin. Why, we ask, does he not use it to refer to Stalin? Why, that is, when he utters 28

(6-4) Lenin is hot

is he talking about Lenin, and not Stalin? Because he knows certain identifying facts about Lenin that single him (Lenin) out in the multitude of other individuals. So, because Ivan knows that Lenin was the first Soviet dictator, in using 'Lenin' in his utterance of (6-4) he refers to Lenin, rather than Stalin. If names connote nothing, as Mill has it, then this capacity is unexplained. We recognise here the Fregean theory of sense.

NEGATIVE EXISTENTIALS. Yet another motivation is to interpret statements such as: 29

(6-5) Zeus does not exist,

appears meaningful. But if Zeus indeed did not exist, and if the meaning of 'Zeus' is given by the very individual it refers to, then (6-5) should be meaningless. As we saw earlier, this case is also a problem for Frege: if the name 'Zeus' *does* have a genuine sense, but lacks reference, then the whole sentence should lack reference as well. Unlike sentences of fiction ('Zeus loved Io'), here we have a 'serious' sentence purporting to state how things really are. It is no good to paraphrase (6-5) as:

(6-6) According to science, Zeus does not exist.

This would put a true scientific theory at the same level as any false theory or fiction. We rather wish to say that Zeus does not exist, full stop.

Descriptivism shows a way out. The statement (6-5) should now be interpreted along these lines:

(6-7) There is no (single) individual who had such and such qualities (Zeus-like qualities) and performed such and such acts.

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