

The Frege-Russell picture of names

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1 Reference and meaning

Kripke begins *Naming and Necessity* by talking about a view of how names work which was defended by the philosophers Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell. To understand that view, it will help to understand how the terms ‘meaning’ and ‘reference’ are used in the philosophy of language.

1.1 Reference

The reference of a linguistic expression is that expression’s contribution to determining the truth or falsity of simple sentences in which it occurs. Reference is, to a first approximation, power to affect truth-value.

If the reference of an expression is that expression’s power to affect the truth-value of sentences in which it occurs, and if a theory of reference is to give us a satisfying explanation of the relations between sentences and the world in virtue of which some are true and some false, then there had better be a systematic connection between the references of sub-sentential expressions and the truth-values of sentences. In particular, the following connection between reference and truth had better be true:

The truth-value of a sentence is a function of the references of the expressions which compose the sentences, along with the way in which they are combined (and along with, of course, the relevant facts about the world).

E.g., the truth or falsity of

John loves Mary.

should be determined by the references of ‘John’, ‘Mary’, ‘loves’, the way the three terms are combined, and the relevant extra-linguistic facts about John and Mary.

This gives us an initial test for when two expressions have the same, or different, reference: two expressions have the same reference iff substitution of one for another in a sentence never changes that sentence’s truth value.

1.2 *The reference of names, descriptions, and predicates*

What is the reference of a name, like ‘Jeff Speaks’? The standard view is that the reference of a name is the thing for which it stands. Why is this plausible?

Definite descriptions are phrases of the form ‘the such-and-such.’ What do you think the reference of a description like ‘the tallest student in this class’ is?

How about a predicate, like ‘is a teacher’? A standard view is that the reference of this predicate is the set of all of the teachers. Why is this a natural view, given our explanation of what ‘reference’ means?

1.3 *Reference vs. meaning*

Intuitively, the meaning of a sentence is what that sentence says. Two sentences mean the same thing just in case they say the same thing.

Suppose someone proposed the view that meaning and reference were the same thing. This view faces the immediate problem that two sentences can be composed of expressions which have the same reference, and yet say quite different things. Some examples:

Clark Kent is Superman.

Superman is Superman.

All cordates are renates.

All cordates are cordates.

Examples like these seem to show that meaning is not the same thing as reference. And this raises a question: if the meaning of a name is not its reference, what is it? This is the question that the Frege-Russell picture of names is designed to answer.

2 **Russell’s theory of descriptions**

As it turns out, both Frege and Russell thought that the meanings of names were closely related to the meanings of definite descriptions. They had, however, quite different views of the meanings of descriptions. Those differences won’t matter much for us, so here I’ll focus on Russell’s view of the meanings of descriptions.

In his article ‘Descriptions,’ here is what Russell says:

‘It remains to interpret phrases containing *the*. These are by far the most interesting and difficult of denoting phrases. Take as an instance ‘the father of Charles II was executed.’ This asserts that there was an *x* who was the father of Charles II and was executed. Now *the*, when it is strictly used,

involves uniqueness; we do, it is true, speak of ‘the son of So-and-so’ even when So-and-so has several sons, but it would be more correct to say ‘a son of So-and-so.’ Thus for our purposes we take *the* as involving uniqueness.’

According to Russell, when we have a sentence

The F is G.

what this says is

There is exactly one thing which is F, and that thing is G.

This contrasts with indefinite descriptions; Russell thought that sentences like

An F is G.

say

There is at least one thing which is F, and also G.

How well does Russell’s view fit with our use of ‘the’ in ordinary English?

3 Names as disguised descriptions

Both Russell and Frege had substantially similar pictures of how ordinary proper names work. In particular, both thought that there was no fundamental difference between ordinary proper names and definite descriptions. Simplifying a bit, we can say that they thought that names were simply definite descriptions in disguise.

Which descriptions? A natural answer is: the descriptions associated with the name by speakers of the language. So, for example, ‘Superman’ might mean something like ‘the flying cape-wearing superhero’ — or something like that. This is sometimes called a ‘descriptivist’ view of names.

Why would anyone hold this view? As Kripke notes on pp. 28-29, there are powerful arguments in favor of this classical view of names. He mentions three.

3.1 *Explaining the reference of names*

We have been assuming that ‘Jeff Speaks’ refers to me, that the name ‘Aristotle’ refers to Aristotle, that the name ‘Hesperus’ refers to the planet Venus, and so on. And this is certainly correct: these names do refer to these things. But this can seem kind of amazing.

Think about the name ‘Hesperus’. It refers to an enormous object out in space that we can occasionally see. How did this series of sounds, or this bunch of marks on the board, get linked up with this object? No one flew out there and put a label on the planet. And just think: people can learn this name, and use it to refer to this far away object, even if they have never seen it, and know hardly anything about it. So even for these people, who seemingly have no contact with the planet itself, there is some important connection between this word and the planet. This is deeply puzzling; how did this link get set up? Or, as Kripke puts it, how does the reference of a name get fixed?

As Kripke points out, it is an important strength of the classical Frege-Russell picture of naming that it has a story to tell about this. According to the classical view, we associate descriptions with names, and the references of names are fixed by those descriptions. In the case of ‘Hesperus’, we associate with it the description ‘the second planet from the sun’, or ‘the brightest star in the evening sky’, or something like that. It’s not so puzzling how we can associate these descriptions with names; we just stipulate that we are going to use ‘Hesperus’ as a name for the second planet from the sun, for example. And this is enough to make this description the meaning of the name, and enough to fix the referent via the description. So the classical picture seems to successfully dissolve this puzzle about how reference is determined.

3.2 Differences in meaning between names with the same reference

The second motivation behind the classical view mentioned by Kripke picks up on a point we have already made. It seems clear that, when one says ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’, one is not just, trivially, asserting the identity of Venus with itself. Rather, one is saying something substantive, saying something which could be the result of a discovery.

But this is puzzling if the meaning of a name just is its reference, for then it seems as though sentences like this would just say that a thing is identical to itself.

The description theory again has a natural and elegant solution: in such cases, we associate different descriptions with the two names, and it is often a substantive discovery that the same object satisfies the two descriptions. We might be saying, for example, that the brightest star in the evening sky is identical to the brightest star in the morning sky. And this is of course a non-trivial claim that one might discover.

3.3 The problem of negative existentials

A negative existential is a sentence of the form

N does not exist.

It seems clear that sentences of this form can be meaningful, and are sometimes true. But these sentences are quite puzzling from the point of view of a theory which identifies the meaning of a name with its reference. This is because, if ‘N’ has a reference, then the above sentence must be false — as Kripke says, ‘once we’ve got the thing, we know that it existed.’

Again, the classical theory is ready with a natural answer. What we are really saying, says the Frege-Russell theory, is that there is no object which uniquely satisfies the description associated with the name. So, for example,

Santa Claus does not exist.

says that there is not exactly one thing which satisfies the description ‘the jolly red-suit wearing man who delivers gifts to kids with the help of magic flying reindeer’ (or something like that). And that seems exactly right.

4 Different versions of descriptivism

4.1 *One description or many?*

Kripke notes that there is an obvious problem with the classical theory of names, and one that other people, including Frege and Russell, have noticed. And this is that it does not seem that there is just one description associated with most names. Different people might associate different descriptions with the same name; some people might think of Aristotle as ‘the last great philosopher of antiquity’, others might think of him as ‘the author of the *Metaphysics*’, others as ‘the most famous student of Plato.’ There seems no way to decide which of these descriptions provides the meaning of the name, ‘Aristotle.’

In a famous passage in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein states a related motivation for abandoning the classical view in favor of a view of names as more closely related to groups of descriptions:

‘If one says ‘Moses did not exist’, this may mean various things. It may mean: the Israelites did not have a single leader when they withdrew from Egypt — or: their leader was not called Moses — or: there cannot have been anyone who accomplished all that the Bible relates of Moses — ... But when I make a statement about Moses, — am I always ready to substitute some one of those descriptions for ‘Moses’? ... Have I decided how much must be proved false for me to give up my proposition as false? Has the name ‘Moses’ got a fixed and unequivocal use for me in all possible cases?’ (*Investigations*, 79)

This has led people, Kripke thinks, to abandon the details of the classical picture without abandoning its underlying motivations. What people do is to say that the meaning of a proper name is given, not by a single description, but by a cluster, or a bunch, of descriptions. So the meaning of ‘Aristotle’ might be given by the list of descriptions we gave above, plus a bunch more. The referent of the name would then be that object, if any, who satisfied most of these descriptions, or enough of these descriptions, or something like that. The details of the theory needn’t detain us. The point is that there is this basic problem with the classical theory, but that it seems as though we can revise that theory, while still keeping to the spirit of the view that the meanings of names are given by the descriptions associated with them by speakers.

In what follows, I will largely ignore this complication, and discuss the view which takes the meaning of a name to be given by a single description. We will come back and see whether the success of any of Kripke's arguments turns on this.

4.2 Meaning or reference fixing?

Kripke also distinguishes between two different versions of the descriptive theory: between that version where the description is taken to be synonymous with (to give the meaning of) the name, and that version where the description is not synonymous with the name, but does determine its reference.

Kripke's application of this distinction to the case of proper names:

‘Frege should be criticized for using the term ‘sense’ in two senses. For he takes the sense of a designator to be its meaning; and he also takes it to be the way its reference is determined. Identifying the two, he supposes that both are given by definite descriptions.’

The distinction between two kinds of descriptivism: the view that the reference of a name is fixed by the reference of its associated description, and the view that the meaning of a name is the same as the meaning of its associated description. The falsity of the second kind of descriptivism would not entail the falsity of the first kind; descriptions might fix the reference of names without giving their meaning.

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The Frege-Russell picture of names is an impressive theory. Nonetheless, Kripke says, ‘I think it's pretty certain that the view of Frege and Russell is false.’ Our job will be to get clear on why he thinks this.