

# KRIPKE, NAMING AND NECESSITY

PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE · BOB BEDDOR

## Descriptivist Theory of Names

### Two Types of Descriptivism

**Semantic Descriptivism** = The view that the meaning of a proper name is an associated definite descriptions. E.g.:

- “Aristotle” means “The teacher of Alexander the Great”
- “Barack Obama” means “The 44<sup>th</sup> President of the U.S.”

**Referential Descriptivism** = The view that the reference of a proper name is fixed by an associated definite description.

How are these different? Consider Kripke’s example of the standard meter stick in Paris. This stick is used to fix the reference of the term, “meter”, but it’s implausible that the word *means* something like “the length of the standard meter stick in Paris.”

*Question:* Is adopting referential descriptivism sufficient for solving the problems that Frege and Russell were concerned with? Or would one have to adopt semantic descriptivism?

### Multiple Descriptions and the Cluster View

One immediate problem with either form of descriptivism is that it faces the question: which description should we use? Consider again the name “Aristotle”. Well, there are lots of descriptions one might associate with this name, e.g.:

- “The teacher of Alexander the Great”
- “The writer of the *Nicomachean Ethics*”
- “The best student of Plato”

Which of these is the meaning of the name, “Aristotle”? Singling out any one of them seems arbitrary.

One answer to this problem is to use a *cluster* of descriptions (Searle 1958). This idea—cluster descriptivism—can be implemented as either a thesis about meaning or a thesis about reference-fixing:

**Semantic Cluster Descriptivism** = The view that the meaning of a name is a cluster of associated descriptions.

Thus the meaning of “Aristotle” might be the conjunction of all of the associated descriptions (e.g., “The teacher of Alexander the Great and the writer of the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the best student of Plato,” etc.).

**Referential Cluster Descriptivism** = The view that the meaning of a name is fixed by a cluster of associated descriptions.

## Kripke’s Objections to Descriptivism

### The Modal Objection

*Some Background:*

Some things that are true *could* have been false. For example:

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- (1) Magnus Carlsen won the 2016 world chess championship.

This is known as a *contingent* truth. Even though it's true, we can imagine possible circumstances in which it turned out to be false (circumstances in which someone else won the 2016 world chess championship).

Other truths are *necessarily* true. For example:

- (2)  $2+2=4$ .  
(3) Every triangle has three angles.

These are truths that couldn't possibly have turned out to be false; we can't imagine a possible circumstance in which they are false. (Of course, we can imagine a possible circumstance in which someone *thinks* they are false! But this is different from imagining a situation in which they really are false.)

**Necessary Truth:** Something is a *necessary* truth if and only (iff) it couldn't possibly have been false.

**Contingent Truth:** Something is a contingent truth iff both (i) it's true, (ii) it could have been false.

Often you will see these distinctions formulated in terms of *possible worlds*...

- A possible world is an alternative reality—it's a way the world could have been. (Here the notion of a 'world' should be understood to include not just a planet, but the whole universe.) For instance, there's a possible world in which Plato died in infancy; there's a possible world in which WWI never happened; there's a possible world in which the Roman Empire never fell, etc.

We can reformulate our definitions of necessary and contingent truths in terms of possible worlds:

**Necessary Truth:** A proposition  $p$  is necessarily true iff it's true at every possible world.

**Contingent Truth:** A proposition  $p$  is contingently true at a world  $w$  iff both:

- (i)  $p$  true at  $w$ .  
(ii) There's some other world,  $w'$ , where  $p$  is false.

These distinctions are reflected in ordinary language. *Modals* are terms that have to do with necessity and possibility. For example, *necessarily* and *must* express necessity, whereas *possible/possibly*, *could*, *can*, and *might* express possibility.

Ok, so where's the problem for descriptivism? Contrast:

- (4) Aristotle was Aristotle.  
(5) Aristotle was the teacher of Alexander the Great.

Kripke argues that (4) is a necessary truth: Aristotle couldn't have failed to have been Aristotle. By contrast, (5) is a contingent truth. It could have turned out that someone other than Aristotle taught Alexander the Great.

To put the point another way, (6) is true, whereas (7) is false:

- (6) Aristotle might not have been the teacher of Alexander the Great.  
(7) Aristotle might not have Aristotle.

But according to semantic descriptivism, "Aristotle" just means something like "the teacher of Alexander the Great". So how can this be?

Kripke sums up the basic lesson here by saying that names are *rigid designators*: they refer to the same individual in every world where that individual exists. Definite descriptions such as "The teacher of Alexander the Great" aren't rigid designators. We can

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imagine a world where Aristotle never went into pedagogy and someone else taught Alexander. But we can't imagine a world where Aristotle isn't Aristotle.

*Question:* Kripke thinks this objection generalizes to semantic cluster descriptivism. How so? Do you agree?

### The Epistemic Objection

Here is another argument that Kripke mentions briefly. Something is knowable *a priori* if it can be known on the basis of reason alone—without, e.g., empirical investigation. Note that (8) seems to be knowable *a priori*:

- (8) If Aristotle exists, then Aristotle is Aristotle.

By contrast, the following does not seem to be knowable *a priori*:

- (9) If Aristotle exists, then Aristotle is the teacher of Alexander the Great.

But if semantic descriptivism is true, then “Aristotle” just means the same thing as “the teacher of Alexander the Great.” But then it is hard to see how (8) could be true, and (9) be false.

### The Objection from Ignorance

The previous objections targeted semantic descriptivism. Are there any problems for referential descriptivism? Kripke thinks the answer is “Yes.” Here is one of his objections:

Consider the name, “Cicero”. According to descriptivism, the meaning of this is some associated definite description, such as “the man who denounced Catline.” But, Kripke argues:

It is a tribute to the education of philosophers that they have held this thesis for such a long time. In fact, most

people, when they think of Cicero, just think of a *famous Roman orator*, without any pretension to think either that there was only one famous Roman orator or that one must know something else about Cicero to have a referent for the name.

Here's one way of formulating the objection:

1. The average person only associates the name “Cicero” with the description “a famous Roman orator”.
2. The average person only associates the name “Catiline” with the description “a famous Roman orator”.
3. If referential descriptivism is true, then for the average person, “Cicero” has the same referent as “Catiline”. (From 1, 2, and the def. of Referential Descriptivism)
4. But when the average person uses “Cicero”, their use refers to Cicero; and when the average person uses “Catiline”, their use refers to Catiline.
5. So referential descriptivism is wrong. (From 3, 4, and 5)

Kripke also gives the example of Richard Feynman. The average person on the street might not know anything about him other than that he's a physicist, and hence doesn't know a description that will differentiate him from some other physicist.

### The Argument from Error

Kripke also argues that we can successfully refer to someone via a proper name *N* even if none of the descriptions we associate with *N* are actually true of *N*.

- Example: Suppose the description you associate with Godel is “the person who proved the incompleteness theorem”. Now suppose it turns out that the person who actually proved the

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incompleteness theorem was someone else, Schmitt, and that Godel stole his proof. According to referential descriptivism, it follows that when we use the term, “Godel”, we’re actually referring to Schmitt. But, Kripke argues, this seems wrong.

## If descriptivism is dead, what’s the right view of names?

Here’s the alternative picture Kripke suggests:

“Someone, let’s say a baby, is born; his parents call him by a certain name. They talk about him to their friends. Other people meet him. Through various sorts of talk the name is spread from link to link as if by a chain. A speaker who is on the far end of this chain, who has heard about, say Richard Feynman in the market place or somewhere, may be referring to Richard Feynman even though he can’t remember from whom he first heard of Feynman or from whom he ever heard of Feynman... A certain passage of communication reaching ultimately to the man himself does reach the speaker. He then is referring to Feynman even though he can’t identify him uniquely... He’d have trouble distinguishing between Feynman and Gell-Mann. So he doesn’t have to know these things, but, instead a chain of communication going back to Feynman himself has been established, by virtue of his membership in a community which passed the name on from link to link, not by a ceremony that he makes in private in his study: ‘By “Feynman” I shall the mean who did such and such and such and such.’”

Basic idea: a use of name  $N$  refers to some person (or object etc.)  $x$  in virtue of a causal chain linking the use of  $N$  with some initial baptism (naming event) of  $x$  with that very name. (E.g., My use of “Barack Obama” is causally dependent on other people’s use of the

term “Barack Obama”, which is causally dependent on still other people’s use of the term, etc., until we get to some original event where his parents named him “Barack Obama.”)

## Possible Rejoinders

### Rigidified Descriptivism

In response to the modal argument, some have been inclined to adopt *rigidified descriptivism*. One way of fleshing this out is to reformulate the descriptions with the term, “actual” (or “actually”), e.g.:

- “The teacher of Alexander the Great” becomes “The actual teacher of Alexander the Great”

Here the idea is that we interpret “actually  $F$ ” as meaning, “Whatever satisfies  $F$  at the actual world (i.e., *this* world!)”.

*Q:* Does satisfactorily save semantic descriptivism from the modal objection?

### Metalinguistic Descriptivism

What if we abandon the idea that “Aristotle” means “The teacher of Alexander the Great” (or some such), and simply say: “Aristotle” means “The individual called ‘Aristotle’”? More generally, what if for any name  $N$ , we take the associated description to be “The individual called  $N$ ”?

*Questions:* Which, if any, of the problems does it solve? Does Kripke raise (or can you think of) any objections to an account along these lines?

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## Causal Descriptivism

The basic idea behind Kripke's positive proposal is that the reference of a name is determined, at least in part, by causal/historical relations. But could descriptivists hijack this insight, converting it into a form of descriptivism? According to "causal descriptivism", the use of a name  $N$  means something like "The individual who was baptized in some initial naming ceremony by a name that stands in a certain causal/historical relation to our use of the name ' $N$ '".

*Questions:* Does this view avoid the problems Kripke raises for rival versions of descriptivism?

## Extending Kripke's Picture

On the alternative picture developed by Kripke, someone's use of a name derives it from a causal-historical chain. Others have extended this sort of picture to natural kind terms such as "water". On this view, the reason our use of "water" refers to  $H_2O$  is that a certain type of stuff was baptized with the term "water", and this use of the term passed down in our community. In another world where the lakes and the streams were filled with a visually (and olfactorily etc.) indistinguishable substance with the chemical makeup  $XYZ$ , then their use of "water" would refer to  $XYZ$  (Putnam 1975). Putnam's conclusion: "meanings just ain't in the head!"