

3 Proper names: the Description Theory

Overview

Russell seems to have refuted the Referential Theory of Meaning for definite descriptions, by showing that descriptions are not genuinely singular terms. Perhaps that is not so surprising, since descriptions are complex expressions in that they have independently meaningful parts. But one might naturally continue to think that ordinary proper names are genuinely singular terms. Yet the four puzzles—about nonexistents, negative existentials, and the rest—arise just as insistently for proper names as they did for descriptions.

Frege offered solutions to the puzzles by proposing that a name has a *sense* in addition to its referent, the sense being a “way of presenting” the term’s referent. But he said far too little about what “senses” are and how they actually work.

Russell solved this problem by arguing, fairly persuasively, that ordinary proper names are really disguised definite descriptions. This hypothesis allowed him to solve the four puzzles for proper names by extending his Theory of Descriptions to them.

Yet Russell’s claim that proper names are semantically equivalent to descriptions faces serious objections: for example, that it is hard to find a specific description to which a given name is equivalent, and that people for whom the same name expresses different descriptions would be talking past each other when they tried to discuss the same person or thing. John Searle proposed a looser, “cluster” description theory of proper names that avoids the initial objections to Russell’s view. But Saul Kripke and others have amassed further objections that apply as much to Searle’s looser theory as to Russell’s.

Frege and the puzzles

We may have agreed with Russell that the Referential Theory of Meaning is false of descriptions because descriptions are not really (logically) singular terms, but we may continue to hold the Referential Theory for proper names themselves. Surely *names* are just names; they have their meanings simply by designating the particular things they designate, and introducing those designata into discourse. (Let us call such an expression a *Millian* name, since

John Stuart Mill (1843/1973) seemed to defend the view that proper names are merely labels for individual persons or objects and contribute no more than those individuals themselves to the meanings of sentences in which they occur.) But recall our initial objection to Russell's Theory of Descriptions: that, although it was motivated entirely by the four puzzles, the puzzles are not at all specific to definite descriptions, because they arose just as insistently—not to mention *first*—for proper names as well.

Frege preceded Russell in offering solutions to the puzzles. We have already seen what he said about Apparent Reference to Nonexistents:

- (1) James Moriarty is bald

is meaningful because the name "James Moriarty" has a "sense" over and above its putative referent, even if there is in fact no referent. In fact, nothing is referred to or *denoted* by the name, but the sense is "expressed" by it.

For Frege, the "sense" was, roughly, a particular "way of presenting" the term's putative referent. Though itself an abstract entity rather than a mental or psychological one, the sense reflects a person's conception or way of thinking of the referent. Frege sometimes expressed senses in the form of definite descriptions; for example, the sense of the name "Aristotle" might be "Plato's disciple and the teacher of Alexander the Great," or "the Stagirite teacher of Alexander" (Frege 1892/1952b: 58n). A sense determines a unique referent, but multiple senses may determine the same referent.

Let us now see how Frege attacked the other three puzzles.

NEGATIVE EXISTENTIALS

- (2) Pegasus never existed.

As before, (2) seems to be true and seems to be about Pegasus, but if (2) is true, (2) cannot be about Pegasus Notice that there is a worse complication here than is raised by the Problem of Apparent Reference to Nonexistents alone: whereas (1) is meaningful despite the nonexistence of James Moriarty, (2) is not only meaningful despite Pegasus' nonexistence but actually and importantly true.

The idea of senses as particular modes of presentation affords Frege at least an impressionistic solution to the Problem of Negative Existentials (though whether this was actually his view and how it might be made precise are unclear): (2) can be taken to mean roughly that the sense of "Pegasus," the conception of a winged horse ridden by Bellerophon, fails to find a referent—not even a "nonexistent" one. Nothing in reality answers to that sense.¹

The reason this idea is not straightforward is that for Frege a name only "expresses" and does not denote its own sense. So (2) is not literally about the sense of "Pegasus," and does not out-and-out say of that sense that it lacks a

referent, even though the latter is one thing we philosophers know when we know that (2) is true.

FREGE'S PUZZLE

(3) Mark Twain is Samuel Langhorne Clemens

contains two proper names, both of which pick out or denote the same person or thing, and so—if the names are Millian—should be trivially true. Yet as before, (3) seems both informative and contingent. (A fictional example is “Superman is Clark Kent”; according to Mr. Jerry Siegel’s comic-book saga, dilettante millionaires spent time and money trying to discover Superman’s secret identity.)

On Frege’s view, although the two names in (3) pick out a common referent, they “present” that individual in different ways; they have importantly different senses. And what he calls “cognitive significance” goes with sense, rather than with reference. This is what he writes:

When we found ‘ $a = a$ ’ and ‘ $a = b$ ’ to have different cognitive values, the explanation is that for the purpose of knowledge, the sense of the sentence, viz., the thought expressed by it, is no less relevant than its reference . . . If now $a = b$, then indeed the reference of ‘ b ’ is the same as that of ‘ a ’, and hence the truth-value of ‘ $a = b$ ’ is the same as that of ‘ $a = a$.’ In spite of this, the sense of ‘ b ’ may differ from that of ‘ a ’, and thereby the thought expressed in ‘ $a = b$ ’ differs from that of ‘ $a = a$.’ In that case the two sentences do not have the same cognitive value.

(1892/1952b: 78).

(But we are not told how it is that “ $a = b$ ” can be *contingent*.)

SUBSTITUTIVITY

(4) Albert believes that Samuel Langhorne Clemens was less than 5 feet tall.

But substituting “Mark Twain” for “Samuel Langhorne Clemens” in (4) produces a falsehood; as in the previous chapter, the singular-term position governed by “believes that” is referentially opaque. If the names were Millian, and contributed nothing to meaning besides the introduction of their referents into discourse, the substitution should make no difference at all and the position would be transparent.

Here Frege makes an ingenious move. The problem, we recall, was that the opacity was induced by the “believes that” construction, since what follows it is not itself opaque. Since belief is a cognitive matter, Frege supposed

that what determine a belief sentence's truth-value are the senses rather than merely the referents of the expressions that follow the belief operator. He therefore suggests that what the operator does is to shift the reference of the name in particular: Inside "believes that," the name refers not, as usually, to Clemens/Twain the person, but to its own sense. That is why the result of substituting "Mark Twain" into (4) has a different truth-value: In the belief context, "Mark Twain" refers to *its* sense, a different one from that of "Samuel Langhorne Clemens."

Thus Frege's distinction between reference and "sense" enables him to address each of the puzzles. And his solutions sound right, so far as they go: Names contribute meaning of some sort over and above their referents, and that is what makes the differences where we see differences, of course. But the solutions sound right, I suspect, because of their schematic nature. Frege calls the added meaning "sense," but says little more about it (likewise about "expressing" as opposed to denoting, "cognitive significance," and the like). In particular, he does not say what sort of meaning it is or what positive contribution it makes. This has an air of labeling rather than solving the problem. (But we shall consider a much more substantive and testable implementation of Frege's view in chapter 10.)

Perhaps we could pick up on Frege's further hint that names can have the senses of *descriptions*. That is just what Russell did, and it led him to a very rich approach to the puzzles.²

RUSSELL'S NAME CLAIM

Russell's response is both brilliant and strongly defended. He turns around and offers a new thesis, which I will call the Name Claim. The claim is that everyday proper names *are not really names*, at least not genuine Millian names. They look like names and they sound like names when we say them out loud, but they are not names at the level of logical form, where expressions' logical properties are laid bare. In fact, Russell maintains, they are equivalent to definite descriptions. Indeed he says they "abbreviate" descriptions, and he seems to mean that fairly literally.

Thus Russell introduces a second semantic appearance–reality distinction; just as definite descriptions are singular terms only in the sense of surface grammar, the same—more surprisingly—is true of ordinary proper names themselves. Here, of course, the difference is more dramatic. If you look at a definite description without referentialist bias, you can see that it has got some conceptual structure to it, in the form of independently meaningful words occurring in it that seem to contribute to its own overall meaning. So it is not too big a surprise to be told that underlying the misleadingly simple appearance of the word "the," there is quantificational material. But now we are told the same about a kind of expression that looks conceptually simple.

If the Name Claim is true, then Russell's solution to the four puzzles does generalize after all—because we just replace the names by the definite

descriptions they express and then proceed as in chapter 2; the Russellian solutions apply just as before (whether or not we think they are good ones in the first place). Thus names do have what Frege thought of as “senses,” that can differ despite sameness of referent, but Russell gives an analysis of these rather than taking them as primitive items of some abstract sort.

It is important to see that the Name Claim is entirely independent of the Theory of Descriptions itself. (People often use the phrase “Russell’s theory of descriptions” as lumping together a number of different things Russell believed, including the Name Claim.) But one might accept either doctrine while rejecting the other: some theorists hold the Theory of Descriptions as a theory of definite descriptions themselves, while rejecting the Name Claim entirely; less commonly, one could embrace the Name Claim but hold a theory of descriptions different from Russell’s.

In support of the Theory of Descriptions, Russell gave a direct argument; then he touted the theory’s power in solving puzzles. He makes a similar explanatory case for the Name Claim, in that the claim lends his theory of proper names the same power to solve puzzles—puzzles that looked considerably nastier for names than they did for descriptions. But he also gives at least one direct argument, and a second is easily extracted from his writings.

First, recall Russell’s direct defense of his theory of definite descriptions: He maintains that a sentence containing a definite description does intuitively entail each of the three clauses that make up his analysis of it, and the three clauses jointly entail the sentence. He now argues that the same is true of sentences containing proper names.

Take one of the toughest cases of all, a negative existential. (2) (“Pegasus never existed”) is actually true. What, then, could it mean? It does not pick out an existing thing and assert falsely that the thing is nonexistent; nor does it pick out a Meinongian entity and deny existence of it. It merely assures us that in fact there was no such winged horse. Similarly, “Sherlock Holmes never existed” means that there never actually was a legendary English detective who lived at 221B Baker Street and so on. This is very plausible.

The second direct argument (never given explicitly so far as I know) calls attention to a kind of clarificatory question. Suppose you hear someone using a name, say “Lili Boulanger,” and you do not know who the speaker is talking about. You ask who that is. The speaker replies, “Oh, the first woman ever to have won the Prix de Rome, in 1913, with her cantata *Faust et Hélène*”; and that is a proper answer. You asked because, so to speak, you did not understand the name you heard. In order to come to understand it, you had to ask a “who” question, and the answer had to be a description. (Merely giving a second proper name of Boulanger would not have done the trick, unless you had previously associated *that* name with a description.)

Or we could use “who” questions as a kind of testing, which might be called the “spot-check test.” Suppose you used the name “Wilfrid Sellars,” and I whip around and say “Who’s that?” All you can reply, all that comes out, is “Um, the famous philosopher at Pittsburgh who wrote those really

dense books” or the like. In general, when asked “Who [or what] do you mean?” after one has just used a name, one immediately and instinctively comes up with a description, as an explanation of what one meant.

John Searle (1958) made a similar appeal to learning and teaching: how do you teach a new proper name to a child, and how do you learn the referent of a particular name from someone else? In the first case, you produce one or more descriptions; in the latter, you elicit them.

These are very robust phenomena; so the Name Claim is not just a desperate lunge made in order to solve the proper-name versions of the four puzzles.

Russell speaks aggressively of names’ “abbreviating” descriptions, as if they were merely *short for* the descriptions as “the U.S.A.” is short for “the United States of America.” That is too strong. All Russell actually needs for his analytical purposes is the weaker contention that names are somehow equivalent in meaning to descriptions (let us call that weaker thesis the Description Theory of proper names).

Yet even the less ambitious Description Theory has since come in for severe criticism.

Opening objections

OBJECTION I

Searle (1958) complained that, if proper names are equivalent to descriptions, then for each name there must be some particular description that it is equivalent to. For example, if I unreflectively muse,

(5) Wilfrid Sellars was an honest man,

what am I saying, given that I know a fair number of individuating facts about Sellars? Searle tries out a couple of candidate description types, and finds them wanting. We might suppose that “Wilfrid Sellars” is for me equivalent to “The one and only thing x such that x is F and x is G and . . . ,” where F , G , and the rest are *all* the predicates that I would apply (or believe truly applicable) to the man in question. But this would have the nasty consequence that (5) as I use it *entails*

(6) There is at least one philosopher with whom I had a fairly violent argument in George Pappas’ living room in 1979

—and (5) surely does not entail (6), for me or for anyone else.

Now, the spot-check test ought to supply a more local answer for each use of a name, and as we have seen, it is plausible to think that a speaker can normally cough up a fairly specific description when prodded. But it is unclear that this is always because the description was one the speaker

already had determinately in mind. If you ask me, "Who is Sellars?," I might make any of a number of answers that come to mind, depending on what sort of information I think you may want about him. It hardly follows that the answer I do produce is the precise description that my use of "Sellars" antecedently expressed.

Notice: The complaint is not merely that it would be hard to *find out* which description a speaker "had in mind" in uttering some name. The stronger thesis is that at least in many cases *there is no* single determinate description that the speaker "has in mind," either consciously or subconsciously. I see little reason (independent of the semantical puzzles) for thinking that there is a fact of the matter as to whether "Wilfrid Sellars" is used as equivalent to "The author of 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,'" or "Pittsburgh's most famous philosopher," or "The inventor of the 'Theory' theory of mental terms," or "The man on whose paper I had to comment at the Tenth Chapel Hill Colloquium in 1976," not forgetting "The visiting philosopher with whom I had a fairly violent argument in George Pappas' living room in 1979." I need have had none of these in particular (even tacitly) in mind when I unreflectively uttered (5).

OBJECTION 2

Undeniably, different people know different things about other people. In some cases X's knowledge about Z and Y's knowledge about Z may not even overlap. Assuming that the descriptions with which names are supposed to be synonymous are in speakers' minds as revealed by the spot-check test, it follows from the Name Claim that the same name will have (many) different senses for different people; every name is multiply and unfathomably ambiguous. For, if names are equivalent to definite descriptions, they are equivalent to different definite descriptions in different people's mouths, and for that matter to different descriptions in the same person's mouth at different times, both because one's knowledge keeps fluctuating and because what is psychologically prominent about one person for another keeps fluctuating too.

And things get worse. Suppose that I am thinking of Wilfrid Sellars as "the author of 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,'" and suppose you are thinking of Sellars as "Pittsburgh's most famous philosopher." Then we would be curiously unable to disagree about Sellars. If I were to say, "Sellars used to tie his shoes with one hand," and you said "That's ridiculous, Sellars did no such thing," we would (on Russell's view) not be contradicting one another. For the sentence I had uttered would be a generalization:

- (7) One and only one person wrote "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man", and whoever wrote "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man" used to tie his shoes with one hand

while yours would be just a different generalization:

- (8) One and only one person was a philosopher more famous than any other in Pittsburgh, and whoever was a philosopher more famous than any other in Pittsburgh did no such thing as tie his shoes with one hand.

And the two statements would be entirely compatible from a logical point of view. What looked like a spirited dispute, verging on fistfight, is no real dispute at all; we are merely talking past each another. But that seems quite wrong.³

Searle's Cluster Theory

In light of these two objections (and several others) to Russell's version of the Description Theory, John Searle offered a looser and more sophisticated variant. He suggested that a name is associated, not with any particular description, but with a vague cluster of descriptions. As he puts it, the force of "This is *N*," where *N* is replaced by a proper name, is to assert that a sufficient but so far unspecified number of "standard identifying statements" associated with the name are true of the object demonstrated by "this"; that is, the name refers to whatever object satisfies a sufficient but vague and unspecified number (SBVAUN) of the descriptions generally associated with it. (Searle adds the metaphysical claim that *to be* the person *N* is to have a SBVAUN of the relevant properties.)

The vagueness is important; Searle says it is precisely what distinguishes names from descriptions, and in fact is why we have and use names as opposed to descriptions. Notice that, if the Name Claim were correct, then proper names' only function would be to save breath or ink; they would be just shorthand. Searle insists that, rather than being equivalent to a single description, a name functions as a "peg . . . on which to hang descriptions" (1958: 172), and that is what enables us to get a linguistic handle on the world in the first place.

We would need to make some refinements. For example, if one is a Searlean it seems natural to require that a "sufficient number" be at least *over half*—otherwise two obviously distinct individuals could both be the name's referent. Also, we would surely want to say that some of a person's identifying properties are more important than others in determining his or her identity; some way of *weighting* the identifying descriptions is involved.

This Cluster Theory allows Searle to avoid the two objections we have raised for Russell's view. Objection 1 is mooted because Searle has abandoned the commitment that for each name there must be some one particular description that it expresses. The name is tied semantically just to a loose cluster of descriptions. Objection 2 is blunted (Searle believes) by the fact that different people can have different subclusters of descriptive material in mind, yet each have a SBVAUN of identifying descriptions and thereby succeed in referring to the same individual.⁴

Thus Searle tried to mitigate the opening objections to Russell's theory by offering his looser cluster version of the description approach. This version seems to qualify as a sensible middle way between Russell's view and the Millian conception of names apparently discredited by the four puzzles. But, building on some important ideas of Ruth Barcan Marcus (1960, 1961), Saul Kripke (1972/1980) went on to subject Russell's Name Claim and Searle's Cluster Theory together to a more sustained critique. He argued that Searle had not backed far enough away from Russell, for Searle's view inherits problems of much the same kinds; rather, the whole Descriptivist picture of proper names is misguided. The theory of reference has never been the same.

Kripke's critique

OBJECTION 3

Suppose that "Richard Nixon" is equivalent to "the winner of the 1968 U.S. Presidential election." And now consider a question about possibility. (Questions about possibility and necessity are called *modal* questions; more about these in the next chapter.) Could Richard Nixon have lost the 1968 election? The answer seems *unequivocally* to be "Yes," assuming that "could" here expresses merely theoretical, logical, or metaphysical possibility rather than something about the state of our knowledge. But according to the Description Theory, our question means the same as

- (9) Is it possible that: one and only one person won the 1968 election and whoever won the 1968 election lost the 1968 election?

the answer to which is clearly "No."

Searle's Cluster Theory may seem to offer an improvement, because it is possible that a person who satisfies a SBVAUN of the description cluster associated with "Richard Nixon" nonetheless does not satisfy the particular description "winner of the 1968 election." But, Kripke points out, human possibility extends further than that: Nixon the individual person might not have done *any* of the things generally associated with him. He might have apprenticed himself at age twelve to a sandal-maker and gone on to make sandals all his life, never going anywhere near politics or public life at all and never once getting his name in any newspaper. Yet, obviously, it is not possible that a person who satisfies a SBVAUN of the description cluster associated with "Richard Nixon" nonetheless does not satisfy any at all of the descriptions in that cluster. On Searle's view, the character who went into sandal-making would not have been the referent of "Richard Nixon" and for that matter would not have been Richard Nixon. And that seems wrong.

Michael Dummett (1973) has protested that objection 3 is simply invalid as it stands; at least, it rests on a hidden false assumption. We may infer that our modal question is synonymous with (9) only by assuming that, if "Richard

Nixon” is equivalent to a description at all, it is equivalent to one that has narrow scope; in the terminology of chapter 2, that is a “secondary” occurrence with respect to “It is possible that.” What if the relevant description has wide scope? Then our original question is synonymous, not with (9), but with

(10) One and only one person won the 1968 election, and, concerning whoever won the 1968 election, is it possible that that person lost?

(10) is clumsy; also, there are other, irrelevant disambiguations of our question due to the fact that the interrogative operator itself has scope, so let me make the point more simply using just the indicative versions of the two readings. The sentence

(11) It is possible for Richard Nixon to have lost the 1968 election,

presuming that “Richard Nixon” is equivalent to “the winner of the 1968 election,” is ambiguous as between the narrow-scope reading

Possible: $(\exists x)(Wx \ \& \ (y) (Wy \rightarrow y = x) \ \& \ (z) (Wz \rightarrow \sim Wz))$

which corresponds to (11) and is false (I have represented “lost” as “did not win”), and the wide-scope reading

$(\exists x)(Wx \ \& \ (y)(Wy \rightarrow y = x) \ \& \ (z) (Wz \rightarrow \text{Possible: } \sim Wz))$

which presumably is true. Colloquially, (11) means that one and only one person won the election and whoever won it is such that *s/he* could have lost.⁵

In a similar but more sophisticated move, some philosophers have finessed objection 3 by “rigidifying” the descriptions in terms of which they explicate names: Understand “Richard Nixon,” not as “the winner of the 1968 election,” but as “the *actual* winner of the 1968 election.” See the next chapter.

OBJECTION 4

Kripke (1972/1980: 83–7) offers an (utterly fictional!) example regarding Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem, a famous metamathematical result. In Kripke’s fiction, the theorem was proved in the 1920s by a man named Schmidt, who died mysteriously without publishing it. Kurt Gödel came along, appropriated the manuscript, and scurrilously published it under his own name.⁶ Now, most people know Gödel, if at all, as the man who proved the Incompleteness Theorem. Yet it seems clear that, when even those who know nothing else about Gödel utter the name “Gödel,” they do refer to Gödel rather than to the entirely unknown Schmidt. For example, when they say “Gödel proved the Incompleteness Theorem,” they are speaking falsely, however well justified they may be in their belief.

This objection too goes against Searle's Cluster Theory as well as against the classical Russellian view. Suppose no one in fact proved the Incompleteness Theorem; Schmidt's alleged proof was irreparably flawed, or perhaps there was not even any Schmidt, but "the proof simply materialized by a random scattering of atoms on a piece of paper" (p. 86). Here it is even more obviously true that most people's uses of "Gödel" refer to Gödel rather than to anyone else at all; yet those uses are not even backed by any Searlean cluster.

OBJECTION 5

Consider the sentence

- (12) Some people are unaware that Cicero is Tully.

(12) is ostensibly true but, if the Name Claim is correct, (12) is hard to interpret, for "there is no single proposition denoted by the 'that' clause, that the community of normal English speakers expresses by 'Cicero is Tully'" (Kripke 1979b: 245). Since "Cicero" and "Tully" are equivalent to different descriptions for different people, there is no single fact of which (12) says some people are unaware. Now, if I assert (12), presumably its complement clause expresses what "Cicero is Tully" means in *my* speech. But since I know that Cicero is Tully, I associate the same set of descriptions (whatever they might be) with both names. Suppose that, like most philosophers, I associate both "Cicero" and "Tully" with "the famous Roman orator who denounced Catiline and who figures in some famous examples of Quine's." Then (12) is equivalent to:

- (13) Some people are unaware that one and only one person was a famous Roman . . . [etc.] and one and only one person was a famous Roman . . . [etc.] and whoever was a famous Roman . . . [etc.] was a famous Roman . . . [etc.].

That massively redundant sentence is equivalent to:

- (14) Some people are unaware that one and only one person was a famous Roman orator who denounced Catiline and who figures in some famous examples of Quine's.

No doubt (14) is true, but surely it does not express what (12) *means*, even when (12) is uttered by me.

It is far from obvious how Searle might handle objection 5, either.

OBJECTION 6

If the Name Claim is true, then every name is “backed” by a description that applies *uniquely* to the name’s referent. But most people associate “Cicero” only with “a famous Roman orator” or some other indefinite description, and, say, “Richard Feynman” only with “a leading [then] contemporary theoretical physicist”; yet these people succeed not only in using those names correctly but also in referring to Cicero and to Feynman respectively when they do so. Moreover, two names of the same person, such as “Cicero” and “Tully,” may well have the same indefinite description as backing and, when they do, no Russellian theory can explain their continuing failure to substitute in belief contexts (Kripke 1972/1980: 80ff., 1979b: 246–7).

More generally, it does not take much to succeed in referring to a person. Keith Donnellan (1970) offers an example in which a child who has gone to bed and to sleep is awakened briefly by his parents. They have with them Tom, an old friend of the family who is visiting and wanted just to see the child. The parents say, “This is our friend Tom.” Tom says, “Hello, youngster,” and the episode is over; the child has only barely woken. In the morning, the child wakes with a vague memory that Tom is a nice man. But the child has no descriptive material at all associated with the name “Tom”; he may not even remember that Tom was the person that he was semi-awake to meet during the night. Yet, Donnellan argues, that does not prevent him from succeeding in referring to Tom; there is a person who is being said to be a nice man, and it is Tom.

OBJECTION 7

Russell emphatically wanted his theory to apply to *fictional* names such as “Hamlet” and “Sherlock Holmes” and “the free lunch.” If the Name Claim is correct, then, any sentence containing a fictional name in a “primary” or wide-scope position will come out false. For example,

(15) Sherlock Holmes lived at 221B Baker Street

will come out false because it is supposed to be equivalent to

(16) One and only one person was [that is, *there exists* exactly one person who was] a famous detective who . . . [etc.] and whoever was a famous detective who . . . [etc.] lived at 221B Baker Street,

and (16) is false (there having existed, in fact, no such person). But some fictional sentences, such as (15) itself and “Hamlet was a Dane,” are *true* sentences, or at any rate not false ones.

Russell would not have been much swayed by this argument, since he had no inclination to call it *true*, as opposed to merely “make-believe-true” or

“true-in-fiction,” that Holmes lives at Baker Street or whatever. (NB: if it were true that Holmes lived in Baker Street, then it would be true of Baker Street, a real place to this day, that it had had Holmes living in it. Also, if such sentences were true just in virtue of someone’s having written them in popular books or stories, then it would be equally true that Holmes *existed*, Hamlet existed, and so on, since people say those things in books and stories too; this point is strangely overlooked.) Yet some people want to insist that fictional sentences are literally truth-valueless rather than *false*; if you are sympathetic to this, you will want to hold a Kripkean theory of fictional names rather than Russell’s (Kripke 1972/1980:156–8). Donnellan (1974) defends such a theory in more detail.

Kripke has a further and in a way more fundamental objection to the Description Theory, but it requires a bit of technical apparatus. That apparatus is one we will be needing again anyway. I shall develop it in the next chapter.

Summary

- The four logical puzzles about reference arise just as insistently for ordinary proper names as they did for definite descriptions.
- Frege offered solutions in terms of what he called “senses,” but the solutions do not really explain.
- In response, Russell extended his Theory of Descriptions by defending the Name Claim.
- But the Name Claim faces at least two powerful objections.
- Searle offers a looser, “cluster” version of the Description Theory of names, which avoids the initial objections.
- But Kripke marshals a host of further objections that apply to Searle’s view as trenchantly as they do to Russell’s stricter theory.

Questions

- 1 Are Frege’s solutions to the puzzles really solutions, after all? What do they explain, absent the assumption that “senses” take the form of descriptions?
- 2 Suppose you reject Russell’s Name Claim. How might you then solve the four puzzles, in regard to names?
- 3 Respond on Russell’s behalf to one or more of the two opening objections; or come up with a further objection.
- 4 Does Searle’s Cluster Theory really avoid objections 1 and 2, in ways that Russell’s stricter version of Descriptivism did not?
- 5 Can you think of an objection to Searle’s theory that does *not* apply to Russell’s original theory?
- 6 Can Russell rebut any of Kripke’s objections 3–7? Even if Russell cannot, can Searle?

Further reading

- Russell's Name Claim is defended most accessibly in "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism" (1918/1956).
- For some criticisms of the Name Claim similar to Kripke's, see Donnellan (1970).
- Searle addresses the matter of fictional names in chapter 3 of Searle (1979a). He replies to some of Kripke's objections in chapter 9 of Searle (1983). More generally, there is a huge literature on fictional names; see, for example, Everett and Hofweber (2000), Braun (2005), and the references therein.
- Burge (1973), Loar (1976), Bach (1987) and others have defended more specific sorts of Description theory against Kripke, versions that avoid some of the objections.