

Humpty Dumpty and Alice on the Naming Puzzle (L. Carroll under Frege X Kripke)

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RESUMO – O presente artigo trata da discussão em Filosofia da Linguagem sobre a validade ou não de se considerar nome próprio como portador de significado.

Palavras-chave: nome próprio; denotação; conotação.

ABSTRACT – This paper discusses the idea of proper name having or not meaning, a relevant topic in the Philosophy of Language.

Keywords: proper name; denotation; connotation.

*“Don’t stand chattering to yourself like that”
Humpty Dumpty said, looking at her for the first time,
“but tell me your name and your business.”
“My name is Alice, but –
“It’s a stupid name enough!”
Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently.
“What does it mean?”
“Must a name mean something?”
Alice asked doubtfully.
“Of course it must”,
Humpty Dumpty said with a laugh: my name means the shape
I am and a good handsome shape it is, too.
“With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost.”¹*

This passage from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* which is of a misleading simplicity expresses, indeed, one of the most intriguing puzzles in the history of philosophy of language.

(A) How do proper names work?

In our daily use of ordinary language, nothing is more elementary than the act of naming. People do name things or persons in a natural, non-problematic way. And because of this, it is not surprising that, from Aristotle to Kripke, the attempts to have a proper understanding of this basic property of human languages have been subject to so many barriers that, if not insurmountable, are at least of extreme complexity.

Semantics, in its modern version, might represent the most specific subject to the logical, philosophical and linguistic researches on the reference phenomena, under which there are maybe the most relevant questions to a

theory of meaning of natural languages, once through the act of referring the world becomes part of language and language becomes part of the world.

Within the general context of the reference theory the proper name has a special place for it seems that the moment it has to depict the object, it becomes extremely opaque. This lack of semantic consistency has brought, especially to logicians, a huge theoretical difficulty. In the first part of the last century, Stuart Mill with his first book about the system of *Logic Of names and propositions* can undoubtedly be considered one of the precursors of the contemporary investigations on the nature of names.² For Mill, “*Proper names are not connotative. They denote the individuals who*

¹ Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*.

² Further details in Costa (1997), “A teoria dos Nomes na Lógica de Mill”. In: BOMBASSARO; PAVIANI. *Filosofia, lógica e existência*. Caxias do Sul: EDUCS.

are called by them; but they don't indicate or imply any attributes as belonging to those individuals".³

Frege, in his attempt to construct a logical foundation to arithmetic had to work thoroughly with the concept of proper name which appear in a decisive way, though fragmented, in almost all of his work,

The meaning of a proper name is the object itself which we designate by using it; the idea which we have in that case is wholly subjective; in between lies the sense, which is indeed no longer subjective like the idea, but is yet not the object itself.⁴

As it can be seen, inside his logics project Frege tried to distinguish, in terms of proper names, the designated object, what he called "reference" from the way it is determined, what he called "sense" of a subjective mental representation, or idea, totally irrelevant to logic. By following this point of view, although firmly devoted to the interests of his formal project, Frege managed to define a proper name in its common sense.

In the case of an actual proper name such as "Aristotle" opinions as to sense may differ. It might, for instance, be taken to be the following: the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great. Anybody who does this will attach another sense to the sentence "Aristotle was born in Stagira" than will a man who takes as the sense of the name: the teacher of Alexander the Great who was born in Stagira. So long as the thing meant remains the same, such variations of sense may be tolerated, although they are to be avoided in the theoretical structure of a demonstrative science and ought not occur in a perfect language.⁵

Because of such issues, whether he wanted or not, Frege had to work on the proper name category to give consistency to his theoretical architecture. It is Dummett, undoubtedly the most devoted critic of Frege, who calls attention to this fact:

If we do not know precisely what constitutes a "proper name" in Frege's sense, that is, a singular term, then we likewise do not know precisely what constitutes any one of the various categories of incomplete expressions save the essential operators: for, as we have seen, these categories are defined inductively, starting with "proper names" (...).⁶

Likewise, to Russell, a contemporary of Frege's, proper names constitute a big issue of theoretical relevance not only to logic and mathematics but mainly to the theory of knowledge, once the process of denoting is of indisputable importance to these subjects.

(...) the subject of denoting is of very great importance, not in logic and mathematics, but also in theory of knowledge.⁷

Russell claims, however, that due to the fact that the importance of this theory of proper names is only well known to logicians, it has been neglected throughout

the years. To him, proper names are by definition the expression of particulars,

The only kind of a word that is theoretically capable of standing for a particular is a proper name, and the whole matter of proper names is rather curious.

Proper names = words for particulars,⁸

although in their daily use they are nothing but abbreviated expressions for descriptions for (...) *The names that we commonly use, like "Socrates", are really abbreviations for descriptions; not only that, but what they describe are not particulars but complicated systems of classes or series.*⁹

Russell, like Frege, being totally devoted to his project of constructing the logical foundations of mathematics, has faced, with extreme rigor, the difficult paradoxes of reference in such a way that he virtually abolished from the realm of proper names the proper names of ordinary language, as he states in his *Knowledge of Language*:

That makes it very difficult to get any instance of a name at all in the proper strict logical sense of the word. The only words one does use as names in the logical sense are words like "this" or "that".¹⁰

Here, he took a route opposite to Frege's, for whom the category of proper name is extremely broad. On the other hand, Kripke, maybe the philosopher who has done the most radical criticism on Frege's ideas on proper names and Russell's description theory, has also been developing an exhaustive analysis on this troublesome subject. According to him it is so problematic that he even suspects that any other theory of proper names would be wrong.

Let me state then what the cluster concept theory of name is. (It really is a nice theory. The only defect I think it has is probably common to all philosophical theories. It's wrong. You may suspect me of proposing another theory in its place; but I hope not, because I'm sure it's wrong too if it is a theory).¹¹

What concerns Kripke, following a millian insight, is that the idea of proper names being equivalent to definite descriptions or concept clusters is wrong in its philosophical nature. However, one should not expect from Kripke an alternative philosophical theory. On the

³ MILL, S. *A system of logic*. Robson (ed.) Routledge & Kegan Paul: University of Toronto Press, 1973. p. 33.

⁴ FREGE. On sense and meaning. In: MCGUINNESS, Brian (Ed.). *Gottlob Frege collected papers on Mathematics, Logic and Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1984. p. 160.

⁵ Ibid. footnote, p. 158.

⁶ DUMMETT, M. *Frege philosophy of language*. 2. ed. London: Duckworth, 1981. p. 54.

⁷ RUSSELL, B. *Logic and knowledge*. New York: Putnam's Sons, 1971. p. 4.

⁸ Ibid., p. 200.

⁹ Ibid., p. 201.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 201.

¹¹ Cf. KRIPKE, S. *Naming and necessity*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980, p. 64.

contrary, what he proposes is only a theoretical framework in which proper names, contrary to Frege's and Russell's descriptive mode, are defined as rigid designators whose function does not go beyond the mere fact of referring an object with no interference of a concept or meaning.

In these lectures, I will argue, intuitively, that proper names are rigid designators, for although the man (Nixon) might not have been the President, it is not the case that he might not have been Nixon (though he might not have been **called** "Nixon").¹²

Kripke is one of the most important authorities on modal logic and has given an outstanding contribution to the philosophy of language, as Putnam points out,

Kripke was led to his discoveries in the philosophy of language partly by work he had done previously in a branch of mathematical logic, modal logic, in which he is the world's outstanding authority.¹³

His theoretical conception of proper names is in the core of his original and well debated Possible Worlds Semantics. Although this issue on proper names is still not quite well solved, for the past few years, a relatively stable theoretical framework has been developed which reveals the dominance of two opposing theories to the study of this troublesome category: the description and the causal theories.¹⁴

These two theories that are the modern starting point of investigation on proper names have their origin on a questioning which unveils the theoretical knot to be untied by logical suppositions:

(B) Do proper names have meaning besides denotation?

The attempts to solve this problem have taken logicians and philosophers of language to two different paths. Not only from what has briefly been mentioned above but also according to critics, Frege, Russell, Mill and Kripke represent the hard core of these divergences. Frege and Russell despite their differences are considered the classical kernel of the description model while Kripke, based on Mill, has a similar function within the so called causal model. The chart below is an attempt to show the contemporary tendencies on the problem of the meaning of proper names.¹⁵

PROPER NAMES HAVE MEANING BESIDES DENOTATION			
YES		NO	
Frege Russell (Quine)	Proper Names have the meaning of a definite co-referential description known to the speaker	Mill	Proper names have denotation but no connotation
Wittgenstein Searle (Strawson)	Proper names have the meaning of an undetermined set of an open set of co-referential descriptions	Ziff	Proper names are not part of language
Davidson Burge	Proper names are like predicates	Kripke Putnam	Proper names are rigid designators whose use is determined by causal chains

The theorists who favor description in general attribute a meaning to a proper name based on its correspondence to a set of definite descriptions normally known as "the such and such". According to this view, the proper name 'Aristotle' is semantically equivalent to descriptions such as "The teacher of Alexander", "Plato's student", "the author of *Metaphysics*" or even an undetermined set of descriptions of this order.

On the other hand, those in favor of a causal theory state that proper names do not have meaning; they only denote, in a rigid way, an individual through a causal chain fixed by any initial baptism. Within this context a proper name such as 'Aristotle' does not have meaning and designates Aristotle in any and every possible world, that is, in those where Aristotle is the teacher of Alexander and in those where he is not.

This contemporary debate has sophisticated variants from both sides. Searle, for example, favors a kind of description view, stating the need of an intentional approach in the study of proper name.

Since linguistic reference is always dependent on or is a form of mental reference and since mental reference is always in virtue of Intentional content including Background and Network, proper names must in some way depend on Intentional content and it is now time to make that way – or those ways – fully explicit.¹⁶

On the other hand, Putnam's approach on natural kinds and physical properties shows many points of contact with Kripke's causal model.

The relation to Kripke's account of proper names is this: in both accounts things which are given existentially and not by criteria help to fix reference. Actual things, whatever their description, which have played a certain causal role in our acquisition and use of terms determine what the terms refer to. A term refers to something if it stands in the right relation (causal continuity in the case of proper names; sameness of "nature" in the case of kind terms) to these existentially given things. In the case of proper

¹² Ibid., p. 49.

¹³ Cf. PUTNAM, H. *Realism and reason* – Philosophical papers. Cambridge: CUP, 1983, p. 55.

¹⁴ Katz is one of the philosophers who have adopted this classification concerning the opposition between the classical and the causal theories, as shown in his work "A proper theory of names" in *Philosophical Studies*, v. 31, p. 1-80, 1977. Another version of his text appears in "The neoclassical theory of reference" in *Contemporary perspectives in the Philosophy of Language* (FRENCH, P.A.; FRENCH, T.A.; UEHLING Jr., T.E.; WETTSTEIN (Ed.). Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1977, p. 103-129). J. Searle in *Intentionality* also adopts the same view.

¹⁵ The chart below with minor adjustments is in Susan Haack's text *Philosophy of Logics*, Cambridge Press, 1979.

¹⁶ SEARLE, J. *Intentionality*. Cambridge: CUP, 1983. p. 232.

names, the existentially given thing is the person or thing originally “baptized” with the name; in the case of natural kind words, the existentially given things are the actual paradigms.¹⁷

This Searle/Putnam debate expresses two radically opposing points of view to solve one of the most thrilling problems within philosophy of language.

(C) Where is the meaning of a name?

To Searle, it is not possible to separate meaning from the intentional content that comes with it. Meaning and intentionality are in the same level within the game of language. They merge. This reason is enough for Searle to state that the meaning is in the mind or, in other words, in the head. *“I think in the relevant sense that meanings are precisely in the head”*.¹⁸

Putnam thinks exactly the other way round: Meaning is not in the head. He opposes to the traditional philosophical view that meaning determines reference. It is reference that determines meaning. Meanings are not in the mind, they are in the world instead.

I described myself as a “realist” (without any qualifying adjective), and I chiefly emphasized the importance of reference in determining meaning in opposition to the idea, traditional among both realists and idealists, that it is meaning that determines reference. Reference itself I described as a matter of causal connections.”¹⁹

This debate between Searle and Putnam is much more complex and sophisticated than it has been presented here. Actually, for the theory of reference it represents a kind of paradigm to the extreme positions to what semantics of natural language must be. Dummett and Davidson, Carnap and Quine, to cite a few, might lead this same debate to different directions.

In the past 30 years, the questioning on reference and proper names has deserved the attention of the most important contemporary logicians and philosophers. We ask, how do linguists fit in this discussion?

As odd as it may seem, although the proper name is a linguistic entity that appears in all parts of the sentence, which can be part of all contexts and that together with the verb heads the game of language, linguists have barely even dedicated their attention to it. It has already become a faded image to say that the proper name is the poor relative of linguistics. It is not the purpose of this text to present the historical reasons that justify this fact. But it is worth remembering that Semantics, in its integrity, is the most problematic and the least developed field in Linguistics. The two so called linguistic revolutions, Saussure’s structural linguistics and Chomsky’s generative grammar have not comprised semantics. Saussure’s book²⁰ is rather a work on the philosophy of linguistics with a methodological point of view against the historical and non-systematic studies of the XIX century than a proper linguistics book. On the other hand, the chomskyan revolution, as it is well

known, deals basically with the development of syntax theory, although one might say that it leaves an open path to the modern investigations of semantics.²¹

Within this context it is not difficult to understand why the category of proper names has been historically put aside from the scope of linguistics. Basically, it is a very simple morphological linguistic entity whose syntax is quite similar to the syntax of names in general. Because of this, when contemporary linguists such as Katz work on proper names, they do so by following the strong heritage of philosophy and through the means of modern logic.²² This strategic or naïve silence from linguists in general has brought some radical consequences.²³

The problem is that the technical label “proper name” concerns a natural language phenomenon and despite its importance to logic and philosophical investigations it cannot be ignored in terms of linguistics. It is not possible to admit that in logic and philosophical inquiries it is a common practice to referring to the linguistic intuition of the speakers to establish some assumptions while these same issues have not yet been adequately worked out under the point of view of Linguistics.²⁴ After all, proper name, a singular term from Logic, within the context of natural language is not the only referring expression there is and surrounded by the speakers’ intentions as well as by the world it still carries its linguistic properties in the act of referring. Logicians and philosophers have indeed taken into consideration linguistic facts, but the kernel of their investigations has neither been a semantic theory of proper names as a natural language entity nor as an entity of a particular language. However, logic and linguistic are somehow connected concerning meaning and reference of a proper name. In some sense, proper names pure linguistic relations are the basis to the logical and ontological expression of reference; and this is an indisputable fact. Alice’s naïve question implies her astonishment as at the idea of a proper name having meaning. Humpty Dumpty’s categorical response implies his certainty about the meanings of a name.

Alice and Kripke or Humpty Dumpty and Frege?

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¹⁷ PUTNAM, H. *Realism and reason* – Philosophical papers, p. 73.

¹⁸ SEARLE. *Intentionality*, p. 200.

¹⁹ PUTNAM, op. cit., p.VII.

²⁰ Cours de Linguistique Général

²¹ From Syntactic Structures (1957) to The Minimalist Program (1995) Chomsky has been strongly developing the syntactic component of his model, with no important contributions to the semantics of proper names.

²² Katz’s “A proper theory of name” is an example of these philosophical and logical roots. He proposes an alternate hypothesis, a neoclassical theory of reference based on Kripke’s discussion over Frege and Russell’s model.

²³ Ziff, for example, suggests that proper names are not part of languages at all. Cf. *Semantic Analysis*, 1960, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 85, 93-94.

²⁴ Zeno Vendler calls attention to this fact in his “Singular terms”, p. 177.