

PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language
Class 7: Searle on Names

1. Last time we saw various problems for Russell's theory of names. In response to some of these problems, Searle (1958), 'Proper Names', proposed a 'cluster theory':
2. He accepts that the meaning of a name cannot be given by a definite description – 'Mark Twain' cannot abbreviate 'The author of *Huckleberry Finn*' because 'Mark Twain' would refer to the same guy even if it turned out that that guy did not write *Huckleberry Finn*. Another way of putting it: We could use "Mark Twain does not satisfy 'the author of *Huckleberry Finn*'" to say something true. (p. 168)
3. But he takes it that the meaning of Mark Twain has *something* to do with definite descriptions. Why? Because there is a cluster of definite descriptions *C* such that we could not use "Mark Twain does not satisfy most definite descriptions in *C*" to say something true – nothing which does not satisfy most definite descriptions in *C* can be the referent of 'Mark Twain'.

Problem for this: is this true? Kripke says no.

4. He proposes: a name does not abbreviate a single description, but is associated with a cluster of descriptions.
5. It does not abbreviate those descriptions – it is not just shorthand for their conjunction. "They function not as descriptions, but as pegs on which to hang descriptions" (p. 172).
6. The name refers to whatever satisfies a sufficient number of those descriptions. If nothing does, or if more than one thing does, then it does not refer. If two things satisfy an equal number of them then it is vague which is the referent of the name.
7. Unlike Russell, he takes it that we use names and definite descriptions to refer, and that the name itself refers. The user of a definite description presupposes that exactly one thing fits the description, and if there is then he refers to that thing. The user of a name presupposes that exactly one thing fits a sufficient number of the associated descriptions, and if there is then he refers to that thing.
8. It sounds like Searle is proposing this: for some cluster of definite descriptions *C*, 'Mark Twain' (for example) means 'the thing which satisfies a sufficient number of descriptions in *C*'.

That would explain the result that he wants: that we cannot use 'Mark Twain does not satisfy most descriptions in *C*' to say something true, because we are saying that the thing which satisfies a sufficient number of descriptions in *C* does not satisfy most descriptions in *C*.

9. Even if 'the author of *Huckleberry Finn*' is in the cluster of descriptions associated with 'Mark Twain', 'Mark Twain' could still refer to the same guy even if that guy were not the author of *Huckleberry Finn*. Thus Searle avoids problem 4e.
10. What about problem 4d? Compare 'Mark Twain might not have written *Huckleberry Finn*' with 'The thing which satisfies a sufficient number of descriptions in *C* might not have written *Huckleberry Finn*'. Does the second have a reading on which it is false? It seems not. Thus Searle avoids problem 4d.
11. But he faces a variant problem. Compare 'Mark Twain might not have satisfied a sufficient number of descriptions in *C*' with 'The thing which satisfies a sufficient number of descriptions in *C* might not have satisfied a sufficient number of descriptions in *C*'. The second has a reading on which it is false, but the first does not. So they are not synonymous.
12. What about problem 4c? Does Searle allow that a speaker can understand 'Mark Twain' without being able to produce a cluster of definite descriptions, or at least one definite description? It seems so. The speaker needs to know which cluster of descriptions is associated with 'Mark Twain', but she can do that without being able to specify any of those descriptions. So Searle seems to avoid problem 4c.
13. What about problem 4b (or the appropriate variant)? Is it plausible that there is a single cluster of descriptions with which 'Mark Twain' (for example) is associated?
14. What about problem 4a? If Searle rejects Russell's account of definite descriptions (which he seems to), then is he better equipped to explain the four facts about names?