

PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language
Class 8: Possible Worlds and Rigid Designators

Possible worlds

1. Philosophers of language often appeal to *possible worlds*. Here is an argument that there are such things: things are a certain way, but there are various ways that things might have been; call those ways that things might have been ‘possible worlds’.
2. Robert Stalnaker takes there to be such a thing as the world, that what we mean by ‘things’ is the world, that ways things might have been are ways the world might have been, and that these are properties of the world. So possible worlds are properties of the world – they are different kinds of thing from the world (so the ‘possible worlds’ terminology is misleading).
3. David Lewis agrees that there is such a thing as the world, but takes ways the world might have been to be worlds as well, of the same kind as our world. So possible worlds are more of the same kind of thing as our world. His position is called *modal realism*.
4. I agree with Stalnaker. But I will follow tradition and follow Lewis.

Rigid designators

5. For a designator d (name, definite description, etc.) to be *rigid* is for d to designate the same thing in every world in which that thing exists – for there to be a thing t such that d designates t in every world in which t exists.
6. For d to be *strongly rigid* is for d to designate the same thing in every world – for there to be a thing t such that d designates t in every world.
7. For d to be *weakly rigid* is for d to be rigid but not strongly rigid – for there to be a thing t such that d designates t in every world in which t exists, and such that there is at least one world in which t does not exist.

If Williamson is right and existence is necessary, then rigid designators are all strongly rigid and there are no weakly rigid designators.

8. For d to be *flaccid* is for d to be non-rigid.

If d designates nothing in any world then is it rigid or non-rigid?

9. Important point: the question is what d designates in world w when d is uttered *in the actual world*, not when it is uttered in w . The issue is not what d might have meant, but what it *actually* means.
10. It is typically said that definite descriptions are non-rigid. The president is George Bush, but it might have been Al Gore. So there is a world in which ‘The president’ designates George Bush (the actual world), and a world in which it designates Al Gore. Since George Bush is not Al Gore, ‘The president’ is not rigid.

Another: 'The president might not have been George Bush' is true, so 'The president' is not rigid.

11. But this is sloppy. What we should say is that 'The president' can be *used* non-rigidly. It can also be used rigidly. There is a reading of 'The president might not have been George Bush' on which it is true, but also a reading on which it is false. On the true reading it is used non-rigidly; on the false reading it is used rigidly.
12. So the rigid vs. non-rigid distinction should ultimately be drawn between uses of designators, not between designators themselves. If definite descriptions are generally used non-rigidly then perhaps it makes sense to call them non-rigid. But it should be kept in mind that this is a derivative notion. Also, is it an interesting fact?
13. Here is a helpful way to think about rigid vs. non-rigid uses of a definite description:

When we use it *rigidly*, we use the property that it expresses to pick out a thing in the actual world, then march that thing from world to world.

When we use it *non-rigidly*, we march the property that it expresses from world to world, and use the property to pick something out in that world (we might fail).

In neither case does the definite description itself get marched from world to world.

Names as rigid designators

14. Kripke claims that names are rigid designators: 'George Bush might not have been George Bush' is false, so 'George Bush' is rigid.
15. But this is sloppy. What he should say is that 'George Bush' can be *used* rigidly. It can also be used non-rigidly: 'In every class, George Bush is the smartest kid.'
16. If names are generally used rigidly then perhaps it makes sense to call them rigid. But it should be kept in mind that this is a derivative notion. Also, is it an interesting fact?
17. Kripke draws the conclusion that since names are rigid and definite descriptions are non-rigid, names are not abbreviated definite descriptions.
18. But this is sloppy. What he should say is that names are typically used rigidly, and definite descriptions are typically used non-rigidly.
19. But it does not follow that names are not abbreviated definite descriptions. Here are two definite descriptions that are typically used rigidly (in fact, are *only* used rigidly): 'The positive square root of four', 'The actual president of the U.S'.

Perhaps names abbreviate definite descriptions of one of these kinds?

20. One last question: Do these last two examples suggest that the rigid vs. non-rigid distinction has been characterized in the wrong way?