

PHIL 3710/LING 3332: Philosophy of Language
Week 2: Names as definite descriptions

1. A question: What is the meaning of a name, such as 'John' or 'London'?
2. Before we try answering: Is it a good question? There is something odd about asking for the meaning of a name (translation between languages?).

Mill on names

1. John Stuart Mill (1843), *A System of Logic*: the meaning of a name is the object that the name denotes (or designates, or refers to, or ...).
2. An immediate problem: there is often no such thing as *the* object that a name denotes, the same name being used on different occasions to denote different things (e.g. 'John', perhaps even 'London').
3. Some would say that different names are being used. Is that plausible?
4. A better approach for the Millian:
 - a. Understand the question, 'What does a name mean', as the question, 'What is a name *used* to mean'?
 - b. Then give the answer: it is used to mean an object (perhaps different ones on different occasions)

Let's just go along with (the annoying) tradition and assume that a name is always used to refer to the same thing.

5. Four (purported) facts about names that are problematic for the Millian:
 - a. **Empty names.** 'Phlogiston is released during combustion' is meaningful, so 'Phlogiston' is meaningful. But 'Phlogiston' is an empty name. 'Sherlock Holmes lived on Baker Street' is meaningful, so 'Sherlock Holmes' is meaningful. But 'Sherlock Holmes' is an empty name. 'Socrates is no longer alive' is meaningful, so 'Socrates' is meaningful. But 'Socrates' is an empty name.

Note: it is controversial whether 'Sherlock Holmes' and 'Socrates' are empty names.

- b. **Negative existentials.** 'Phlogiston does not exist' (or: 'There is no such thing as Phlogiston') is not only meaningful but *true*, so 'Phlogiston' is meaningful. But 'Phlogiston' is an empty name.
 - c. **Frege's puzzle.** 'Samuel Clemens is Mark Twain' can be informative, even to someone who understands the sentence, i.e. knows what 'Samuel Clemens' and 'Mark Twain' mean.

- d. **Propositional attitude verbs.** There are readings of ‘John believes that Mark Twain was a good writer’ and ‘John believes that Samuel Clemens was a good writer’ such that the first can be true while the second is false, thus on which they have different truth values, and thus on which they have different meanings. So they are readings on which ‘Mark Twain’ and ‘Samuel Clemens’ have different meanings.

Frege on names

1. Frege proposed that linguistic expressions have two kinds of meaning: *sinn* (or: sense, meaning) and *bedeutung* (or: reference), and used this to account for these facts.

Russell on names

1. Russell rejects the Millian theory. He claims that **names abbreviate definite descriptions** – that is, for any given name there is a definite description with which it is synonymous (i.e. has the same meaning).

Note: the view is *not* that names *are* definite descriptions.

2. Can the Russellian theory explain the four (purported) facts above? It seems so, in tandem with Russell’s theory of definite descriptions:

Suppose that ‘Phlogiston’ means ‘The substance released during combustion’. Then:

- a. ‘Phlogiston is released during combustion’ means ‘The substance released during combustion is released during combustion’, which means ‘There is at least one substance released during combustion, there is at most one substance released during combustion, and whatever is released during combustion is released during combustion.’
- b. ‘Phlogiston does not exist’, on its true reading (the wide scope reading), means ‘It is not the case that the substance released during combustion exists’, which means ‘It is not the case that there is at least one substance released during combustion, there is at most one substance released during combustion, and whatever is released during combustion exists’.

Suppose that ‘Samuel Clemens’ means ‘The son of John and Jane Clemens’ and that ‘Mark Twain’ means ‘The author of *Huckleberry Finn*’. Then:

- c. ‘Samuel Clemens is Mark Twain’ means ‘The son of John and Jane Clemens is the author of *Huckleberry Finn*’, which means ‘There is at least one son of John and Jane Clemens, there is at most one son of John and Jane Clemens, and whatever is a son of John and Jane Clemens is the author of *Huckleberry Finn*’, which means
- d. ‘John believes that Mark Twain is a good writer’ means ‘John believes that the author of *Huckleberry Finn* is a good writer’, which means ‘John believes that there is at

least one author of *Huckleberry Finn*, there is at most one author of *Huckleberry Finn*, and whatever is an author of *Huckleberry Finn* is a good writer' (if the definite description is understood to have narrow scope; i.e. is a secondary occurrence).

'John believes that Samuel Clemens is a good writer' means 'John believes that the son of John and Jane Clemens is a good writer', which means 'John believes that there is at least one son of John and Jane Clemens, that there is at most one son of John and Jane Clemens, that whatever is a son of John and Jane Clemens is a good writer' (if the definite description is understood to have narrow scope; i.e. is a secondary occurrence).

3. Are there any other reasons to accept Russell's theory of names? Here is one: when asked who 'John' is, we naturally explain using a definite description. Is this a good reason? (Note that we will come up with different definite descriptions in different contexts.)
4. Note: Russell's theory of names is independent of his theory of definite descriptions. That is, one might hold either theory without the other.

Problems for Russell on names

1. If Russell is wrong about definite descriptions, then his theory of names is no better equipped than the Millian theory to explain the four facts about names (the same problems arise for definite descriptions).
2. Which description does a name abbreviate? E.g. Which description does 'Wylie' abbreviate?
 - i. If there is a single definite description *dd* such that 'Wylie' means *dd*, many users of 'Wylie' do not know which one it is, and hence do not understand 'Wylie'. But they *do* understand.
 - ii. But what about: "The person tagged 'Wylie' "? But that seems to assume that names are just tags.
 - iii. Perhaps the meaning of 'Wylie' varies from person to person. But then we are often talking past one another: when A says 'Wylie is handsome', B says 'Wylie is not handsome', they are not disagreeing. But they *are* disagreeing.
 - iv. Unless all of these definite descriptions have the same meaning. But that is implausible (and false on Russell's account of definite descriptions). Unless we are Millian about definite descriptions, but then why not also be Millian about names?
3. Suppose that Russell is right and 'Tony Banks' abbreviates some definite description. Then to understand 'Tony Banks' I must know which definite description it abbreviates. But it seems that I can understand 'Tony Banks' without knowing, of *any* definite description *dd*, that 'Tony Banks' abbreviates *dd* – suppose I remember that I know a guy

called 'Tony Banks', but have no idea who he is or how I know him or anything about him.

4. Suppose that Russell is right and 'Mark Twain' abbreviates a definite description. Suppose that it abbreviates 'The author of *Huckleberry Finn*'. Consider the sentence, 'Mark Twain might not have written *Huckleberry Finn*'. This means 'The author of *Huckleberry Finn* might not have written *Huckleberry Finn*'. But the two cannot be synonymous, because the second but not the first has a reading on which it is false.
5. Suppose that Russell is right and 'Gödel' abbreviates a definite description. Suppose that it abbreviates 'The man who proved the incompleteness theorem'. Suppose that, as a matter of fact, it wasn't Gödel but Schmidt who proved the incompleteness theorem. Then 'Gödel' still refers to Gödel, but 'The man who proved the incompleteness theorem' refers to Schmidt. So they are not synonymous.

Searle on names

1. 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 there is no false reading of "Mark Twain might not have satisfied 'the author of *Huckleberry Finn*'".
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 there is a false reading of "Mark Twain might not have satisfied most definite descriptions in *C*".

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. It does not abbreviate those descriptions – it is not just shorthand for their conjunction. "Names function not as descriptions, but as pegs on which to hang descriptions" (p. 172).
5. 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.
6. 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.

7. 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 there is a false reading of "Mark Twain might not have satisfied most definite descriptions in C ".

But that can't be right, because that would make his theory a Russellian description theory.

8. How does Searle's theory explain the four facts about names?
9. How does Searle's theory fair with the problems that face Russell's theory?