
АНАЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ ФИЛОСОФИЯ

NAMES AS INCOMPLETE DESCRIPTIONS

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Geurts proposed a presuppositional account of proper names, arguing that names are synonymous with descriptions of the form ‘the individual named N’ [Geurts, 1997]. Thus, they are not rigid designators as Kripke suggested [Kripke, 1972]. In many respects, semantic and syntactic behavior of names is the same as that of descriptions. In particular, Geurts shows that names have bound-variable uses:

(1) If a child is christened Bambi, then Disney will sue Bambi’s parents

What he leaves unexplained though is the apparent difference between names and descriptions as illustrated by the following examples:

(2) The president might not have been the president.

(3) Mary might not have been Mary.

While (2) is true (it is easy to imagine a possible world where the actual president took a different carrier), (3) is false (it is hardly possible for Mary not to be herself).

From this, one could conclude that a) proper names are unlike definite descriptions and b) proper names are rigid designators, i. e. they denote the same individual in all possible worlds (where it exists).

However, consider:

(4) The teacher might not have been the teacher.

Although (4) contains a definite description just like (2), it groups with (3) in its truth-value. Intuitively (4) says that the teacher might not have been *herself*, just like (3). The contrast is explained by the fact that in (2) the description is used *predicatively*, while in (4) it is the *referring* use.

Definite descriptions allow the predicative use when they carry a presupposition of uniqueness, which Ramachandran states in the following terms: “*Had things been slightly different, there might have been an F (in the circumstances), but no more than one*” [Ramachandran, 2008, p. 251].

So-called incomplete descriptions (‘the teacher’) normally do not carry a presupposition of uniqueness and cannot be used predicatively. A corresponding indefinite description should be used instead ¹. The same holds for proper names as well, with the only difference that names do not have an indefinite form and need to be paraphrased for the predicative use:

(5) The teacher might not have been a teacher.

(6) Mary might not have been called Mary.

Note that complete descriptions (‘the president’, ‘the best student’, ‘the fifth floor’) do not transform well into indefinites. They are used predicatively without change, which can lead to a confusion in their analysis.

[Maier, 2009] provides another example of the contrast between proper names and their synonymous descriptions:

(7) Mary is called Mary.

(8) The person called Mary is called Mary.

While (7) expresses a contingent proposition, (8) seems to be a tautology. Maier employs complicated machinery to defend the rigidity of proper names. By his analysis (8) receives the following interpretation:

(9) Someone is called Mary.

This is not quite a tautology and contradicts my intuition. Even though (9) is more or less obviously true, (10) is likely false. Yet (11) produces the same tautological impression as (8).

(10) Someone is called JS-15.

(11) The person called JS-15 is called JS-15.

Maier cautiously states that (8) expresses a tautology “*at least on one salient reading*” [Maier 2009, p. 257], implying that there are other non-tautological readings of the sentence. Indeed, if we take (8) to be about a specific

¹ In fact, as [Ramachandran, 2008] points out, incomplete descriptions can be used predicatively but in a special context. And names can too. In an appropriate context (3) and (4) could come out true e. g. with the meaning (correspondingly) “The actress playing Mary might have been given another role” and “The teacher might not have worked as the only teacher in our school”.

individual, it expresses the same contingency as (7). Therefore, the tautological reading arises again out of non-referring use of the definite description. Now it is the *generic* use to be blamed.

(12) The tiger has stripes.

(12) says that tigers generally have stripes. Similarly, (8) in its generic reading says that people called Mary are generally called Mary, which is quite close to a tautology.

Geurts admits that proper names can be used generically:

(13) Coca Cola was invented by an American.

I think (7) also have a generic reading, but it is not the one that quickly comes to mind. Why is that? It is true that Maries do not form a homogenous class, so it does not make much sense to talk about genus of Maries or a typical Mary. This fact certainly impedes the generic interpretation. Then why is such interpretation preferable in (8)? It talks exactly about this class.

I think the answer lies in the realm of pragmatics and Gricean implicatures [Grice 1975]. Normally when we use someone's name, the hearer assumes that we are familiar with the person we are talking about. If the speaker uses the marked phrase 'the person called Mary' instead of 'Mary', the hearer concludes that they must be not familiar with the person. But the possibility that it is some specific person unknown to the speaker is also ruled out because otherwise they would use the indefinite article. Thus, the only possible interpretation is the generic one.

Note that an analogous sentence with an incomplete description has both readings: contingent referring and tautological generic:

(14) The teacher is a teacher.

So far, we have shown that proper names and incomplete definite descriptions are very similar. But where does the impression of rigidity come from?

To test whether a name is rigid we have to postulate a counterfactual situation [Bazzoni, 2018] and assess whether in that situation the name will preserve its reference. For example:

(15) If Mary were called Gertrude, Mary would be happy.

Here 'Mary' shows rigidity. The second mention of 'Mary' refers to the same actual Mary as the first one. It is not surprising. Our fictional world does not provide other potential referents for 'Mary'. The real test for rigidity comes when we postulate a world in which there exist alternative individuals named Mary.

(16) If Mary were called Gertrude and had a friend called Mary, Mary would be happy.

In (16) the last mention of 'Mary' is ambiguous between the actual Mary and her fictional friend. Hence, it is not rigid.

One can object that 'Mary' is just a homonymous word. But to which particular individual does the second homonym of 'Mary' could refer? The counterfactual situation corresponds to a set of possible worlds, each containing potentially different person as the hypothetical Mary's friend. Does that homonym refer to the whole set of those individuals? If so, it is not rigid either.

In addition, a similar example can be constructed with the incomplete description. Should we conclude that 'the teacher' in (17) is homonymous and rigid? I would not say so.

(17) If the teacher were a pupil and took lessons from another teacher, the teacher would be happy.

The conclusion is that the apparent contrast between proper names and definite descriptions has a natural explanation in terms of predicative or generic use of descriptions. The impression of rigidity (applicable to both names and incomplete descriptions) arises when the counterfactual situation lacks other individuals satisfying the description. In the presence of such individuals, the impression of rigidity vanishes.

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