

ATTRIBUTIVE NAMES

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1 The nature and function of proper names has long been a topic of interest to philosophers and logicians. Currently, there are three major theories of proper names in circulation, each purporting to be faithful to the facts of ordinary language—or, failing that, at least adequate to the theoretical purposes of the logician. In terms of their primary orientation, these theories could be categorized respectively as “syntactic”, “semantic”, and “pragmatic”.

The syntactic theory, stemming from Russell [7] and defended in one form or another by most logicians, denies that proper names are genuine singular terms with a referential role. Instead, proper names are regarded as abbreviating certain definite descriptions, which themselves are not independent singular terms but only “incomplete symbols” which disappear upon analysis. Proper names might be said to “connote” on this view, but only because (qua abbreviated definite descriptions) they contribute to the quantificational and *predicative* structure of the sentences containing them.

By way of contrast, the semantic theory, deriving from Mill [6] and revived of late in Kripke [4], allows that proper names are indeed genuine singular terms which denote, but denies that they connote. In order to explain how a connotationless singular term might denote, Kripke has proposed accounting for the denotation of proper names (their “semantic reference”, as he calls it) in terms of a causal chain leading from an initial act of baptizing some object with a name to a current employment of that name by a given speaker. On Kripke’s view, proper names “rigidly designate” their semantic referents, i.e., designate them in all possible worlds in which they exist. (This is *not* to say that a proper name could not denote something other than what it in fact denotes: it is only to say that ‘in *our* language, it stands for that thing, when *we* talk about counterfactual situations’ ([4], p. 289).)

Between these two theories lies a third view, the pragmatic theory. This approach was originated by Searle in [8] and has subsequently been much elaborated by Meiland in [5]. Like the semantic theory, the pragmatic theory regards proper names as genuine singular terms. And like the

syntactic theory, it accords connotation to proper names—albeit in a very different fashion. For the pragmatic theory views the denotation of a proper name as fixed, not objectively by a causal chain or antecedent “sense”, but subjectively by the speaker via the “descriptive backing” which he must have in order to single out that thing to which he intends to refer. Because of this connection with the speaker’s intentions on a given occasion, the pragmatic theory, unlike the semantic theory, allows the denotation of a name to vary from use to use.

It might seem from the foregoing summary that these three theories are irreconcilable rivals—and so it has appeared to many. What I wish to argue, however, is that the rivalry is not so irreconcilable after all. Consider for a moment the parallel controversy about definite descriptions. Russell insisted that definite descriptions are not singular terms and that they should be analyzed away. Strawson [9] argues against Russell that, in ordinary language, definite descriptions *do* function as referential singular terms. And Donnellan [2] attempts to adjudicate the Russell-Strawson debate by distinguishing between *referential* and *attributive* uses of definite descriptions, pointing out that Russell’s treatment is more appropriate to the latter and Strawson’s to the former. Now I think the debate over proper names can be handled in similar fashion. I shall argue that there are *attributive* uses of proper names as well as the more familiar referential employments. In consequence of this fact, it will be seen that a version of the syntactic theory *is* appropriate for attributive names, whereas the semantic and pragmatic theories offer rival accounts of referential names. One value of the notion of “attributive names”, then, is that it draws the lines of battle more clearly: the three theories are not, in general, rivals at all; for they address themselves to different problems. The only residual conflict is between the semantic and pragmatic theories over the proper account of referentially used proper names (*cf.*, e.g., [3] and [1]). A second advantage of the notion of “attributive names” lies in the fact that it affords a strategy for dissolving the much-discussed problem of “referential opacity”. Before touching upon this second point, however, the validity of the referential/attributive distinction for proper names must be established.

2 By ‘attributive proper name’ I mean a proper name so employed as to be a surrogate for an attributive definite description. Attributive names, then, are not deep-structure singular terms but are essentially predicative devices. What makes it especially easy to ignore their existence is that, in the surface-structure of sentences, attributive names are not only orthographically identical with referential names but also—superficially at least—seem to fill the grammatical slot of singular terms. In pointing this out, I wish to set to one side such weary examples as

(1) Trieste is no *Vienna*.

and

(2) He is a *Smith*.

The mere fact that what looks like a proper name can occupy an ostensibly predicative position in a sentence does not establish that the name is attributive, or even a name at all. For (1) is plausibly construed as an ellipsis of

(1a) Trieste is no (match for) *Vienna*.

in which 'Vienna' is a referential name. Similarly, (2) can be thought of as an ellipsis of

(2a) He is a (member of the) *Smith* (family).

in which 'Smith' is not a proper name at all, but rather a fused part of the referential description 'the-Smith-Family'. Plausible cases of attributive names ought to resist such facile evasive tactics.

My strategy will be to rely on our intuitions about which cases involving *definite descriptions* call for attributive readings, and then to construct parallel cases involving proper names. A good place to begin is with certain locutions which figure prominently in crime-stories. Let us suppose that the police are attempting to destroy a certain drug-ring. They have some evidence that the ring is headed by a single man but have as yet been unable to discover his identity. In the course of their investigations, the police are apt to say things like

(3) *The leader of the drug-ring* has high political connections.

The italicized description in (3) is most naturally construed as attributive, so that (3) amounts to

(3a) Whoever leads the drug-ring has high political connections. Imagine further that the police, after interrogating a minor member of the ring, learn that low-ranking affiliates of the syndicate, who do not know the identity of their leader, call him 'Mr. Heroin'. Since 'Mr. Heroin' is a conveniently short expression, the police themselves adopt it, so that (3) is replaced in their speculations by

(4) *Mr. Heroin* has high political connections.

Now I would argue that the name 'Mr. Heroin', as used by the police and minor members of the drug ring when they say things like (4), is merely convenient shorthand for the attributive description in (3). As an aid to seeing this, suppose that the top-ranking members of the ring are all acquainted with the leader but make a practice of calling him 'Mr. Heroin' so as to avoid accidentally revealing his real name to subordinates. When *they* use the name 'Mr. Heroin' in saying something like (4) it seems clear that they are employing it referentially, to pick out a specific colleague. And they could, if they so desired, explain in non-circular fashion just *which* colleague they have in mind. But the police and minor mobsters have no inkling of the leader's identity—indeed, they are not even certain that there is exactly one leader rather than, say, a governing committee.

In short, although "insiders" and "outsiders" may both utter (4), they

make thereby *different statements*: singular and definite in the first instance, general and indefinite in the second. The difference in statements is evinced by a possible difference in truth-value. For suppose that the man whom the insiders call 'Mr. Heroin' is (unbeknownst to them) only a hired actor who takes his orders from the *real* leader, whose identity is totally secret. The actor has no political connections, but the real leader does. In these circumstances, what the insiders say is *false*, since 'Mr. Heroin' (the actor) has no such connections. But what the outsiders say is *true*, since it happens that the ring has a leader who *does* have high political connections. And since there is no apparent way in which the outsiders could succeed in *referring* to the real leader while the insiders merely refer to the actor, the best explanation of this difference in truth-value is that the outsiders, unlike the insiders, use the name 'Mr. Heroin' *attributively* in their utterance of (4)—making thereby the statement one would normally make by uttering (3a).

3 More evidence for the existence of attributive names can be extracted from a simple sentence-frame test. Countenancing attributive uses of definite descriptions has, it is often said, the advantage of allowing us to make straightforward sense of locutions like

(5) The *F*, whoever he is, is *G*.

and

(6) The *F* might not have been the *F*.

which, on the assumption that 'the *F*' is functioning referentially, are either absurd or at least very odd. For example, take 'the father of me' in its colloquial form 'my father' as a replacement for 'the *F*' in (5) and (6), obtaining

(5a) My father, whoever he is, is *G*.

and

(6a) My father might not have been my father.

On the referential interpretation, (6a) would be absurd—unless perhaps it counts as a devious way of saying that my father (*that* man) might not have existed; and (5a) would be rather odd, suggesting that I do not know who my father (*that* *G*-man) is! If, however, we read 'my father' attributively in (5a) and (6a), we get much more plausible translations, viz.,

(5b) Whoever fathered me is *G*.

and, depending on whether one or both occurrences of 'my father' in (6a) are taken attributively, either

(6b) My father (*that* man) might not have fathered me.

or

(6c) Whoever (in fact) fathered me might not have fathered me.

There is nothing absurd or devious about (6b) or (6c); and (5b), although it suggests that I do not know who fathered me, does not convey the odd impression that I am talking about my father (*that* man) and denying knowledge of his identity in one and the same breath.

Exact analogues of (5a) and (6a) exist for proper names as well. Paralleling (5a) we have, e.g.,

(7) John Smith, whoever he is, was (so I see from the newspaper) just elected Nudist of the Year.

On a referential reading (7), like (5a), would create the impression of giving with one hand and taking with the other, i.e., talking about an individual and then denying that I know who I am talking about. Although one *can* make sense of this, it requires some straining. Even so, the context surrounding an utterance like (7) is not likely to support a referential interpretation. If a man is reading the newspaper and comes across an isolated subject-predicate sentence containing an unfamiliar name in subject-position and having a predicate which expresses some "interesting" trait, he will typically turn and say something like

(8) Somebody named 'John Smith' (mentioned in the newspaper) was just elected Nudist of the Year.

taking it for granted that at most one person was accorded this honor. Moreover, he will most likely regard (8) as a rough *paraphrase* of (7), something which would be inexplicable on a referential interpretation of (7). For, on the one hand, (7) and (8) do not seem to be equivalent: the existentially general (8) does not imply the singular (7), and (7) does not imply (8), since 'John Smith' in (7) could be used referentially to pick out a man whose name is *not* 'John Smith'—in which case (7) might be true and (8) false. Nor does either "presuppose" the other: referentially construed, either could have a truth-value (even the specific value "true") when the other is false. Why, then, does it seem so natural to regard (8) as a paraphrase of (7)?

The answer, I suggest, lies in seeing that 'John Smith' is playing an attributive role in (7), abbreviating some such attributive description as 'the man named "John Smith" who is the subject of such-and-such a newspaper report'. (Whether the abbreviated description *mentions* the name in question depends, of course, on whether the name is regarded as actually belonging to the subject of its referential employments; the present case differs in this respect from that of 'Mr. Heroin' above.) Thus (7) should be read as

(7a) Whichever person named 'John Smith' is talked about in such-and-such a newspaper report was just elected Nudist of the Year.

The connection between (7a) and (8) is this: (8) expresses a *presupposition* of the *truth* of (7a); (7a) would be either false or truthvalueless unless (8) were true. And people frequently regard statements so related as rough paraphrases. For example, the truth (*not*: the truth-or-falsity) of

(9) Whoever broke my window hates me.

presupposes the truth of

(10) Somebody who hates me broke my window.

If (10) were false, then (9) would be either false (because my window was broken, but not by someone who hates me) or truth-valueless (because nobody broke my window). Just as (10) will serve most of the ordinary conversational purposes served by (9), so too (8) is often an acceptable proxy for (7a). Let us turn now to proper-name-analogues of (6a), which will require some preliminary stage-setting.

Suppose John has been writing seditious documents and publishing them under the name 'Publius'. Everyone wonders who wrote these documents (they realize that 'Publius' is not the author's real name), and they say things like 'Who could Publius be?', 'What will Publius say next?', etc. Suppose further that John wears a disguise when with his accomplices; they know him only as the author of the materials which they print and distribute. Not knowing John's real name, they naturally call him 'Publius' too. One night a debate arises in the clandestine printshop as to whether *anyone else* would have had the courage to write the dangerous papers in question. An optimistic cohort says

(11) Publius might not have been *Publius* (after all, somebody else could have filled his shoes).

And we (the omniscient observers) could say

(12) John might not have been *Publius* (e.g., Fred might have been).

It is highly improbable that the italicized occurrences of 'Publius' are functioning referentially. Neither we nor the accomplices are entertaining the possibility of a lapse in the Law of Identity, nor is it likely that we or they are merely reflecting on the unexciting possibility that John might not have existed. Intuitively, (11) and (12) say of a certain man that he might not have filled a certain *role*. And the easiest way to account for this intuition is by granting that the italicized occurrences of 'Publius' are surrogates for some attributive description like 'the author of such-and-such papers'. Thus (11) and (12) would amount to

(11a) Publius (*that man*) might not have authored such-and-such papers.

and

(12a) John (that same man) might not have authored such-and-such papers.

4 As a final source of evidence for the existence of attributive names, one may point to sentential contexts in which proper names, if taken referentially, would be doing a job which is totally at odds with the purposes for which such sentences are typically uttered. Consider first a case involving a definite description:

(13) I wish I were *the (present) President of the United States*.

If we construe the italicized portion referentially, (13) would appear to indicate that I wish to be identical with a certain man (as it happens, Nixon) *other* than myself, i.e., it would ascribe to me a desire for a new body, new set of memories, etc. But people very often say things of the form 'I wish I were the *F*', and it is doubtful that anyone ever means thereby that he wishes to engage in transworld body-snatching. What (13) in particular means, is that I want a *new job*, viz., that of presiding over the executive branch of the United States Government. Reading the italicized portion of (13) attributively rather than referentially produces just the right sense, conveyed by

(13a) I wish that I (and I alone) presided over the U.S. Government.

Now compare (13) with (14):

(14) I wish I were J. Paul Getty.

One who utters (14) is not, in normal circumstances, expressing a macabre desire to inherit Getty's body—only a perfectly natural desire to inherit a bank account of several billion dollars. When a man is famous for having a certain property (e.g., vast wealth), his name becomes a convenient way of attributing that property. In (14) the name 'J. Paul Getty' seems to abbreviate some description like 'the richest private citizen in the world', where the latter is used attributively. So we may rephrase (14) as

(14a) I wish I were the world's richest private citizen.

which in turn amounts to

(14b) I wish I were a rich private citizen who is richer than any other private citizen.

where (14b) conveys the gist of what a person would normally mean by (14). The theory of attributive names bears importantly on the problem of referential opacity. If not all apparent singular terms really are such, then what has passed for "opacity" may turn out to be nothing more than a subtle sort of *ambiguity* in the sentences under consideration. The following section offers a brief exploration of this possibility.

5 The notion of referential opacity arises from an alleged datum about certain kinds of sentences: viz., that they contain singular terms in positions which will not tolerate occupation by co-referring singular terms *salva veritate*. The way to discredit this notion is to show that all cases which resist such substitution are cases where the recalcitrant expression is *not* functioning as a singular term with a referential role. What I am suggesting is that any apparent ordinary-language counterexample to the validity of the argument form

$$(A) \quad \begin{array}{c} \dots a \dots \\ \underline{a = b} \\ \dots b \dots \end{array}$$

is not really an argument of form (A)! The reason why the putative counterexample *seems* to be of form (A) is that all of the relevant definite descriptions and proper names which figure in it have been represented as singular terms, when in fact one or more of them are attributive and hence not singular terms at all. When properly formalized, the putative counterexample will have no bearing on the validity of (A).

To carry out the suggested program in detail is far beyond the scope of this paper. But the plausibility of the program is attested by cases like the following. Consider such much-discussed paradigms as

- (A1) a. John believes that Cicero denounced Cataline.
- b. *Cicero is Tully.*
- c. John believes that Tully denounced Cataline.

and

- (A2) a. John believes that Cicero is the author of *De officiis*.
- b. *Tully is the author of De officiis.*
- c. John believes that Cicero is Tully.

Are (A1) and (A2) really of the form (A)? It all depends on whether the relevant names and descriptions are uniformly referential. If they are, then the observation that the arguments (A1) and (A2) are carried out in the *speaker's* idiolect rather than John's goes a long way towards making (A1) and (A2) acceptable, since referential names and descriptions do not "attribute" anything to their bearers. Suppose, however, that (A1) and (A2) strike someone as patently invalid. The theory of attributive names explains this impression not in terms of a breakdown in (A) but rather as an indication that (A1) and (A2) are grammatically ambiguous.

The word 'is', for example, must be regarded as a colloquial version of '=' in all its occurrences in (A1) and (A2) if these are to have the form (A). But 'Cicero' might function attributively in (A1a) or (A1b), in which case (A1) could amount to either

- (B1) John believes that whichever famous Roman orator was named 'Cicero' denounced Cataline.
- Cicero is (=) Tully.*
- John believes that Tully denounced Cataline.

or

- (B2) John believes that Cicero denounced Cataline.
- Tully alone was a famous Roman orator named 'Cicero'.*
- John believes that Tully denounced Cataline.

both of which are invalid, but whose invalidity casts no aspersions on (A). Similar remarks apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to (A2). In all, (A1) has sixteen possible readings, and (A2) has sixty-four. But only one from each set is an argument of form (A), viz., one in which all the relevant names and descriptions function referentially. With so many potential sources of

confusion, it is no wonder that the doctrine of opacity was able to gain a foothold. For it is all too easy to overlook the fact that the only reading of (A1) or (A2) which shows them to be of the form (A) is a reading on which a plausible case *can* be made for their validity. The final step in the reduction of opacity to amphiboly must, of course, incorporate a rigorous theory of the *logical forms* of sentences containing attributive descriptions, especially sentences initiated by a verb of propositional attitude. (Such a theory is presented by W. G. Lycan in 'Referential Opacity Explained Away' (forthcoming).) The theory of attributive names outlined above complements this undertaking by showing how it embraces troublesome occurrences of proper names as well.

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