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Introduction

This book tackles what continues to be a key issue in contemporary semantics and pragmatics: What is the meaning of a proper name? How, for instance, does a contemporary speaker uttering the name 'Aristotle' manage to refer to the famous philosopher in particular, rather than to some other individual (say, Plato, the shipping magnate called 'Aristotle', or John Lennon)? There is something prima facie magical about names: the speaker in 2020 producing what would look to be arbitrary sounds somehow manages to thereby represent a particular individual who is not present here and now, and who lived in Ancient Greece more than 2,000 years ago. How do speakers achieve such remarkable feats? This question amounts to one particular way of asking a more general question that has long fascinated philosophers: *How do words stand for things?*

Proper names have undoubtedly been one of the most discussed topics in contemporary theories of meaning. Issues about the meaning of proper names have marked the beginnings of *analytic philosophy*, which has in turn shaped contemporary semantics and pragmatics. Puzzles about proper names initially fostered the rise of a discipline, the **philosophy of language**, which promoted the use of new logical tools to clarify fundamental questions about meaning and truth. First, Gottlob Frege's groundbreaking theory of meaning, formulated around 1890, rested on a distinction between sense and reference which he was introducing to solve epistemic puzzles about the meaning of proper names. Second, Saul Kripke's critique of Fregean theories of proper names around 1970, rooted in reflections on the interpretation of modal logics, marked a second turn in contemporary semantics and in philosophy of language, but also in philosophy of mind and in epistemology.

This book offers a critical overview of theories of the meaning and reference of proper names deriving from the analytic tradition initiated by Frege. Two distinguishing ideas in that tradition, which have driven contemporary semantics and pragmatics, are

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(i) that the meanings of words must be understood in terms of their contributions to the meanings of the sentences in which they occur, and (ii) that the meanings of sentences must be analysed in terms of **truth conditions**. Then, the meanings of sentences (or utterances thereof) are the primary units, and to know the meaning of a sentence is to know under what conditions it would be true. Thus a competent speaker interpreting the sentence 'Oswald is the murderer of Kennedy' is expected to be able to know on the basis of her semantic knowledge alone that this sentence is true if, and only if, Oswald is the murderer of Kennedy – that is, she is expected to know the *truth conditions* of the sentence. Of course, to know how the world would have to be in order for the sentence to be true is not to know whether the world in fact *is* that way, and so the competent speaker is not expected to know just in virtue of her semantic knowledge whether the sentence is true or false – that is, she is not expected to know the *truth value* of the sentence. Roughly, while semantic knowledge is sufficient to derive the truth conditions of a sentence, empirical knowledge of the world is (usually) also needed to know its truth value. We understand how the world should be in order for the sentence 'Oswald is the murderer of Kennedy' to be true, even though we do not know its truth value, as the identity of the murderer was never proved. To know the truth conditions of a sentence is to know what *content* it has, how it represents the world as being, but not to know whether the content is *true*, whether the world is as represented.

In truth-conditional theories of meaning, the central questions about names become:

(i) What contribution does a proper name make to the truth conditions of the sentences or utterances in which it occurs?
(ii) How do we know to which object a proper name refers on a given occasion of use?

To understand what the competing answers are here, we must compare three kinds of **singular expressions** which serve to refer to particular things in the world:

(1) Proper names: e.g. 'Aristotle', 'Rome', 'Jane', 'Kamala Harris', etc.;
(2) Definite descriptions: e.g. 'the first man on the moon', 'the first woman Vice President of the United States', 'the capital of Laos', etc.;
(3) Indexicals and demonstratives: e.g. 'I', 'here', 'now', 'she', 'that', etc.

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Two things are clear from the outset. First, as for descriptions, the mechanism of designation is descriptional: descriptions refer to things *by describing them*. The definite description 'the first man on the moon' refers to Neil Armstrong because Neil Armstrong is the individual who satisfies the descriptive condition of being the first man on the moon. The description designates an individual *x* if and only if *x* is the first human on the moon. Had another individual satisfied this condition, that other individual would have been the referent. Second, in the case of indexicals, the mechanism of designation is *context-sensitive*: the referent of an indexical varies according to the context in which it is being used. An occurrence of 'I' refers to an individual *x* if and only if *x* is the speaker, an occurrence of 'now' refers to a time *t* if and only if *t* is the time of utterance, and so on. Thus, for both descriptions and indexicals, a distinction must be drawn between **meaning** (what is conventionally determined and encodes conditions that things have to satisfy to become the referent) and **reference** (which is not conventionally fixed and depends upon certain facts about the world, on what happens to satisfy the conditions encoded by the meaning). Some such distinction between meaning and referent is likewise drawn in semiotic triangles from various traditions, where three different broad notions are commonly contrasted:

(a) the word (symbol, vehicle, expression, *signifiant*, etc.);
(b) the meaning (intension, connotation, concept, *signifié*, etc.);
(c) the referent (extension, denotation, object, *référé*, etc.).

However, in the case of proper names, it is not clear that the distinction between meaning and referent can be upheld. That is why proper names have attracted much attention in contemporary philosophy of language, semantics, and pragmatics. At first glance, it sounds as if proper names have a referent, their bearer, but no separate meaning encoding some criterion or indication which could help speakers to figure out what their referent is. To resist that initial intuition, it can be argued that, on closer inspection, the meaning of names encodes some descriptive element or exhibits some sort of context-sensitivity. On the first option, the semantics of names is modelled on that of definite descriptions; on the second, it is modelled on that of indexical and demonstrative expressions, whose referent varies across contexts of use and sometimes on the speaker's intentions. Many more sophisticated theories of names combine such descriptive and indexical elements. Thus three guiding themes throughout this book will be the following:

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(a) Does the meaning of a name involve some *descriptive mechanism* of reference that the competent speaker ought to have in mind in order to successfully refer with the name?
(b) Is the meaning of a name *context-sensitive*?
(c) What is the role of the *speaker's intentions* in determining the reference of a proper name on a given occasion of its use?

Such questions about the meaning of proper names have been extensively studied throughout the twentieth century by logicians, philosophers of language, semanticists, and pragmaticists. Until the late 1960s, the dominant view was a 'descriptivist' doctrine attributed to Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell: a proper name (e.g. 'Aristotle') refers to an individual only if it semantically expresses a descriptive condition which is uniquely satisfied by that individual (e.g. *being the Greek philosopher who was the pupil of Plato and the teacher of Alexander the Great*). Later, the anti-descriptivist rebellion that occurred in the 1970s generated a huge literature. Hundreds of papers and volumes were published on the 'referentialist' revolution impelled by Keith Donnellan, David Kaplan, Saul Kripke, Hilary Putnam, and others. It is difficult to get a firm hold on that sprawling literature: the issues are complex, the debates are often technical, and the bibliographical sources are scattered. Today, there still exists no comprehensive book providing an accessible way into this vast and dense literature.

This book aims to fill that gap. It presents the state of the art through what is hopefully a clear and systematic survey of the literature concerning linguistic reference from Frege to our days. Although the main focus is on proper names, partly because of their historical importance in the debates, the semantics of definite descriptions, indexicals, demonstratives, and natural kind terms is also considered. In *Naming and Necessity* (1980), Kripke forcefully argued that the meaning of a proper name is exhausted by its referent. The present book, guided by the cognitive puzzles to which they are responses, examines and criticises a variety of rejoinders to Kripke contending to identify descriptive or indexical features in the meaning of names. As will quickly become apparent, the most promising theories among those rejoinders are descriptivist theories of some *indexical* sort, which purport to model the distinction between descriptive and referential elements on that, typical of indexicals, between conventional meaning and contextual reference – hence the title of this book. The last chapter is devoted to two-dimensionalism, a framework distinguishing two different contents for every sentence/utterance, which also combines descriptive and

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indexical elements. While the two-dimensionalist accounts are today the most vivid remnants of descriptivism, they come in several very different varieties. I argue that the critical survey of the literature provided in the book as a whole establishes that a new interpretation of two-dimensionalism, the metasyntactic version, is the only form of descriptivism remaining compatible with the various arguments devised in the referentialist revolution, when these are properly understood.

The book is structured as follows. Chapter 1 introduces the issues and puzzles about the meaning of proper names in the philosophy of language, and the descriptivist picture inspired by the theories of Frege and Russell, and then later reformulated through Carnap within a possible world semantics. Chapter 2 presents the referentialist revolution that occurred in the 1970s: it examines Kripke's arguments for the *rigidity* of proper names, Putnam's arguments for *semantic externalism*, and Kaplan's theory of *direct reference* for indexical expressions. In Chapter 3, I reformulate the early puzzles which had led Frege and Russell to descriptivism in the terms of possible world semantics. Following Boghossian, I argue that these puzzles are essentially puzzles arising from violations of principles of *epistemic transparency of content*, which were tacitly presupposed by Frege and Russell. Chapter 4 offers a detailed survey of all sorts of descriptivist responses to the referentialist revolution. I show that the modal, semantic, and epistemic arguments devised by Kripke, Putnam, and Kaplan against the classical form of descriptivism continue to invalidate even those more sophisticated versions of descriptivism. Finally, in Chapter 5, I introduce and discuss two-dimensionalism, the view that sentences or utterances are associated with two notions of content, one descriptive and the other referential. Having presented and defended some of the motivations for the two-dimensionalist move, I examine and criticise the existing interpretations of that framework – pragmatic, semantic, epistemic, metasemantic – and argue that only a new interpretation, the metasyntactic account, is compatible with the lessons gathered throughout the historical survey provided in this book. A glossary will help the reader to easily keep track of some of the important notions and theses.

It would be impossible to approach this vast literature without making certain decisions about questions that are addressed and ones that are left out. I made two important choices: I adopt a standpoint which is shaped by (i) descriptivist and (ii) propositionalist commitments. I am convinced that some descriptive notion of content is required to solve the puzzles which led Frege and Russell

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to descriptivism, and I believe that the clearest notion of content is a modal notion analysing content in terms of sets of possibilities. In this book, I consider only the standard version of modal accounts of content, propositionalism, which identifies the contents of sentences/utterances with sets of (*entire*) possible worlds. These commitments are both debatable, of course, but they make conceptual and historical sense, and I will not seek to defend them in this book. These two choices exclude a number of themes and theories. Thus recent theories invoking *non-descriptive* modes of presentation fall beyond the scope of the present book. Also, the Fregean assumption that the co-reference puzzle *is* really puzzling is taken as a working hypothesis, without being questioned. Frege had started the enquiry leading to his distinction between meaning and referent by claiming that statements of the form "a=a" and "a=b" *obviously* differ in cognitive value: while the former are trivial, the latter are informative. Lately, this claim has been called into question (e.g. Glezakos, 2009a; Almog, 2014), but I choose to take it for granted here, because of its historical importance, and because I believe that it resists scrutiny (see Bochner 2014a). As will be seen in due course, granting this Fregean claim commits to the double assumption (i) that Frege's puzzle shows the referents of proper names to be "opaque" (in the sense that two utterances about the same referent may be taken to be about two referents even by a competent speaker), while (ii) linguistic meanings and contents should be "transparent" (in the sense that a competent speaker should be able to tell just by virtue of understanding them whether any two simultaneous utterances have the same content). This double assumption has effects. First, it excludes from the scope of the book some "neo-Millian" stances denying that Frege's puzzle shows reference to be opaque in the first place. Second, it leads to the claim that *some component of thought* is transparent. I will say in due course how these results follow from descriptivist assumptions which have shaped the debates about names, but, as these matters pertain to epistemology and the philosophy of mind, I will not seek to defend them in the present book, which bears on linguistic reference.

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1 Descriptivism

1.1 MILLIANISM AND LINGUISTIC REFERENTIALISM

In *A System of Logic* (1843/1882: Book I), John Stuart Mill articulated original insights about names, which would later provide a benchmark for analytic philosophy of language and semantics. He begins by arguing against Hobbes that names name *things* in the world, not ideas in the mind:

> Now, when I use a name for the purpose of expressing a belief, it is a belief concerning the thing itself, not concerning my idea of it. . . . Names, therefore, shall always be spoken of in this work as the names of things themselves, and not merely of our ideas of things. (Mill, 1843/1882: 30–31)

Within the category of names, Mill (1843/1882: Book I, ch. 2) draws a distinction (among others) between *connotative* and *non-connotative* (or, in his terminology, purely *denotative*) terms.[1] A connotative term is one which designates an object by implying some attribute or property of that object. For example, the description 'the first President of the United States' is connotative: it designates the object it designates, namely George Washington, *because* that object possesses the attribute of being the first President of the United States; in this sense the description implies that the object designated possesses the attribute. About proper names, by contrast, Mill writes:

> Proper names are not connotative: they denote the individuals who are called by them; but they do not indicate or imply any attributes as belonging to those individuals. When we name a child by the name

[1] Of that distinction, Mill says (1843/1882: 34) that it is 'one of the most important distinctions which we shall have occasion to point out, and one of those which go deepest into the nature of language'.

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> Paul, or a dog by the name Cæsar, these names are simply marks used to enable those individuals to be made subjects of discourse. (Mill, 1843/1882: 36)

According to Mill, a proper name is like a tag or a label for some particular thing. Names such as 'John' or 'Dartmouth' denote an object *directly*, without describing it by any of its attributes. Indeed, he argues, there is no attribute of the object which is such that, if the object ceased to have it, the name would no longer denote the same object:

> It may be said . . . that we must have had some reason for giving them those names rather than any others; and this is true; but the name, once given, is independent of the reason. A man may have been named John, because that was the name of his father; a town may have been named Dartmouth, because it is situated at the mouth of the Dart. But it is no part of the signification of the word John, that the father of the person so called bore the same name; nor even of the word Dartmouth, to be situated at the mouth of the Dart. If sand should choke up the mouth of the river, or an earthquake change its course, and remove it to a distance from the town, the name of the town would not necessarily be changed. That fact, therefore, can form no part of the signification of the word; for otherwise, when the fact confessedly ceased to be true, no one would any longer think of applying the name. Proper names are attached to the objects themselves, and are not dependent on the continuance of any attribute of the object. (Mill, 1843/1882: 36)

On Mill's view, each proper name has a unique bearer, which is its referent in virtue of linguistic conventions, and that referent is all there is to the meaning of the name. Thus *Millianism* in contemporary semantics and philosophy of language corresponds to the following thesis:

Millianism:

> The meaning of a proper name is exhausted by its (unique) referent.

If Millianism is true, the semantics of proper names is as simple as it could be. Their meaning does not encode any indication helping the hearer to figure out which object is their referent. Unlike definite descriptions, proper names refer without describing their referent; and unlike indexicals, their referent does not vary depending on specific features of the contexts in which they are used. In the special case of proper names, meaning *is* reference.

Prima facie, Millianism sits well with pre-theoretical intuitions and initially plausible claims about the distinctive role of proper names in natural languages. First, the suggestion that they do not describe their referent sounds appealing. As John Searle notes, it seems that one

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function of proper names is to allow speakers to talk about the same object even when they do not have (or are unsure that they have) the same descriptions of that object:

> the uniqueness and immense pragmatic convenience of proper names in our language lie precisely in the fact that they enable us to refer publicly to objects without being forced to raise issues and come to agreement on what descriptive characteristics exactly constitute the identity of the object. (Searle, 1958: 172)

Second, as Searle (1958: 170) remarks, it sounds intuitive to say that the reference of a proper name does not vary from one context of use to the next. Russell had already pointed out that the referent of a proper name need not be physically present in the situation of communication:

> 'This' will do very well while we are all here and can see it, but if I wanted to talk about it tomorrow it would be convenient to have christened it and called it 'John'. (Russell, 1918: 523)[2]

Names, it seems, allow us to speak about objects that are remote in time and/or space, and that feature gives them a distinctive and important role in the transmission of beliefs and knowledge. Later, David Kaplan will also be impressed by that apparent characteristic:

> What a nameless person may express by 'I am hungry' may be inexpressible in remote contexts. But once he says 'Let's call me "Bozo"', his Content is accessible. (Kaplan, 1989a: 551)[3]

Thus the Millian ideas that proper names are both *non-descriptional* and *context-insensitive* sound at least initially plausible. Now, Millianism is one instance of *linguistic referentialism*:

> **Linguistic Referentialism:**
> The conventional meaning of some linguistic terms dictates that their contribution to the truth conditions of the statements in which they occur is directly their referent.

In turn, linguistic referentialism is an instance of a more general view, *referentialism*:

[2] In this respect names exemplify the 'most essential function of words: that, primarily, through their connection with images, they bring us into touch with what is remote in time and space' (Russell, 1919b: 22).

[3] See also Napoli (1997: 190): 'The interesting and useful feature of names is that they can be used and are crucially, if by no means exclusively, used *in absentia* of their referent.' In the same vein, Geach (1972: 154) says that it is an essential feature of names that they can be used to talk about the named objects *in absentia*.

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Referentialism:

> Some terms in language or thought are such that they are supposed to contribute directly their referent to the truth conditions of the statements or thoughts in which they occur.

Then, it follows from both Millianism and linguistic referentialism (a) that all co-referring names have the *same* truth-conditional import, and (b) that all names with no referent have *no* truth-conditional import. These two consequences of linguistic referentialism create the most vexing puzzles in theories of meaning, which constitute the main theme of this book. The classic statements of those puzzles, which we owe to Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, have marked the beginnings of analytic philosophy and have shaped the contemporary theories of meaning.

1.2 FREGE AND THE CO-REFERENCE PROBLEM

Millianism says that the conventional meaning of a proper name is its bearer. Thereby it predicts that all co-referring names have the same meaning. Thus for all names N_1 and N_2 belonging to a language L and referring to the same object o, Millianism implies the following theses:

(a) It is a semantic fact in L that the meaning of N_1 is the object o.
(b) It is a semantic fact in L that the meaning of N_2 is the object o.[4]

Now, (a) and (b) have the following logical consequences:

(c) It is a semantic fact in L that N_1 and N_2 have the same meaning: the object o.[5]
(d) It is a semantic fact in L that N_1 and N_2 co-refer.

So Millianism implies that substituting any two co-referential names N_1 and N_2 in any statement S will not change the meaning of S and its truth value.

1.2.1 The Co-Reference Puzzle

Frege (1879/1970; 1892b/1970) noticed an important fact: a competent speaker A mastering the meanings of two co-referential proper names a and b may fail to *know* that they co-refer. While the truth of 'a=a' is

[4] This way of presenting the co-reference problem is inspired by Fine (2007: 34–5).
[5] Fine (2007: 45) notes that this last claim follows from a principle he calls *Closure*, according to which 'Logical consequences of semantic facts are semantic facts.'

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