

Singular Reference: A Descriptivist Perspective

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To Stefania

Preface

I have been thinking about singular reference for many years and I have always been inclined to view it, like Frege and Russell, from a descriptivist perspective, in spite of the many contrary arguments put forward by Donnellan, Kaplan, Kripke and others. However, in the light of these arguments, descriptivism needs nowadays a careful and thorough defence, if it is to be considered a viable and respected approach. I became fully aware of this when a referee who reviewed my earlier paper “A Description Theory of Singular Reference” (2003) complained that, no matter how interesting my form of descriptivism might be, I neglected to shield it from the well-known anti-descriptivist objections. I then decided that I should at the same time present a descriptivist framework capable of resisting these objections and also *show*, by confronting these objections head on, that the framework could in fact resist them. Clearly, this plan could not be carried out in the space of a journal article, but required a whole book. And this is the outcome of that decision taken a few years ago. I wish to thank Springer NL and in particular Ingrid van Laarhoven for having expressed their interest in my project from the start and having waited patiently for the final manuscript.

My past commitment to descriptivism has come in various forms and in various ways underlies most of my writings since my Ph.D. dissertation, *Natural Language Semantics and Guise Theory* (Indiana University, Bloomington, 1986), where a kind of descriptivism is implicit in my endorsement of Castañeda’s guise theory. For that is a theory according to which each singular term refers to a guise, an entity playing in many respects the role of a Fregean sense. More explicit previous versions of descriptivism can however be found in the treatments of proper names and/or indexicals in the above-mentioned 2003 article as well as in my other papers “Kripke’s Translation Puzzle and the Property-Theoretical Performative-Nominalistic Theory of Proper Names” (1998) and “The Property-Theoretical Performative-Nominalistic Theory of Proper Names” (2000) as well as in portions of my short monographs *Predication, Analysis and Reference* (1999) and *La référence singulière et l’autoréférence* (2006). In all these works, proper names are always viewed, roughly speaking, as common nouns with a meaning characterizable as “called *N*” (where *N* is the name in question), which can be used as singular terms by virtue of an implicit definite article. This has remained in the present account, but it has been embellished with a touch of Reichenbach-style token-reflexivity and a touch of so-called causal

descriptivism. The appeal to token-reflexivity is part of a general strategy adopted in an effort to deal with the so-called problem of choice (discussed in § 4.1.1 below), as will be clear in a moment. On the other hand, the recourse to causal descriptivism seems to me now the best choice in response to certain data that in the past I did not perhaps consider with due attention. As regards indexicals, I endorsed in the 1999 monograph a stand analogous to the one defended by Russell at some point of his career (see § 3.8 below), according to which, roughly speaking, the descriptive content expressed in a given context by an indexical such as “this” (or token thereof) is characterizable as “the object presented by p ”, where p is a subjective mental item that perceptually presents to the speaker the object that she refers to. The idea is that the descriptive content available to the hearer is a different one, because it involves a different subjective mental item, although the two descriptive contents are, we may say, extensionally equivalent. The views about indexicals proposed in the 2003 paper and the 2006 monograph differ from each other only in matters of detail but disagree more substantially with the Russellian perspective in that they allow for descriptive contents of various kinds to be associated as meanings to indexicals. The descriptive contents involving mental items representing the referred-to objects are among the options, but others are possible. Notably, there can be descriptive contents characterizable as “the object pointed at by the utterer of the token presented by i ”, where i is a subjective mental image of the token of “this” used by the speaker.

There are two central ideas in all these attempts. First, there is a certain reaction to the problem of choice, according to which it is typically difficult to choose, among the many possible candidates, the descriptive content that functions as *the* meaning of a given singular term in a certain context. Roughly, the reaction consists in claiming that a term *can* have, even after the context has done its disambiguating job, many distinct meanings, provided these meanings are extensionally equivalent. Thus, for example, a given token of “this” may have, *inter alia*, two meanings, one characterizable as “the object presented by p ” and another as “the object pointed at by the utterer of the token presented by i ”. Second, there is an uncompromising internalism, according to which meanings and contents of propositional attitudes do not depend for their existence on concrete items objectively existing outside the minds of thinking subjects, which I summarized in the slogan that “all meanings must be entertainable”. This is why I had recourse to a descriptive content characterizable as “the object pointed at by the utterer of the token presented by i ”, but *not* to one characterizable as “the object pointed at by the utterer of t ”, where t is the objectively existing token of “this” uttered by the speaker.

The approach presented here drops these two ideas. It abandons the uncompromising internalism for a moderate form of externalism, which allows for token-reflexive meanings that depend for their existence on the objectively existing linguistic tokens that express the meanings in question. For, contrary to what I thought in the past, it seems to me now that descriptivism can make this concession to externalism without jeopardizing the possibility of offering a viable account of propositional attitudes and without running into trouble in dealing with the very two issues that any form of descriptivism is especially designed

to tackle, namely the problems of co-reference and no-reference (discussed at length in Chapter 3). Moreover, the current approach reacts to the problem of choice by claiming that, when the problem seems to arise, *one* token-reflexive meaning can be, after all, *the* meaning of the singular term in question, for the other candidates can be given a subsidiary role by exploiting in the appropriate way Kent Bach's theory of conversational implicature (as explained in Chapter 5). It should not be difficult for someone who favours full internalism to see how it could be restored within the framework of this book, by (i) replacing token-reflexive meanings involving objectively existing linguistic tokens with meanings involving subjective mental images of linguistic tokens; and (ii) allowing speaker and hearer meanings to diverge insofar as they involve distinct subjective mental images of one objective linguistic token rather than the mental token itself.

Apart from differing in the way that I have indicated from earlier attempts, my current view is much broader than them in scope, in particular because it deals with tense and anaphora. While on tense an effort is made to remain neutral as regards the current debate between eternalism and temporalism (see § 1.9), a definite stand is taken in the treatment of anaphoras. I propose a version of the paraphrase approach, according to which, for example, and roughly speaking, the anaphoric "her" in "Tom met an Irish woman and liked her very much" expresses a meaning characterizable as "the Irish woman that Tom met". I think that this is a good road to take, because, *inter alia*, by coupling this treatment of anaphoras with descriptivism about non-anaphoric singular terms, we get a unified account of the meaning of all pronouns, whether used deictically or anaphorically, and this, I submit, is as it should be.

Over these years, I have discussed the topics of this book with many colleagues, friends and experts and I wish to thank them all for whatever help they have contributed. In particular, I wish to mention Tyler Burge, Michael Devitt, Nevia Dolcini, Richard Fumerton, Paul Gochet, Tomis Kapitan, Michael Nelson, John Perry, Elisabetta Sacchi, Barry C. Smith, Scott Soames. Special thanks go to my friend Greg Landini for having read and usefully commented on a previous version of the book and above all for his encouragement and support, to Manuel Garcia-Carpintero and Aldo Frigerio, who read the penultimate version of the whole manuscript and offered insightful criticisms, and to Richard Davies, who, in reading the last version, improved its English, while spotting many slips and providing valuable suggestions.

I have offered some of the ideas in this book, or forerunners of them, in lectures at various institutions: University of Palermo (1999), University of Parma (1999), University of Siena (1999), Institut Jean Nicod CNRS, Paris (2004, 2005), Université Paris IV (2005), University of Iowa, Iowa City (2006), Northern Illinois University, De Kalb (2006), and University of Bologna (2007). Moreover, I presented papers on topics covered here at the following conferences: *From Semantics to Pragmatics, Problems and Theories of Reference* (University of Palermo, 1997) *2nd German-Italian Colloquium in Analytic Philosophy* (University of Heidelberg, October 2000), *7th National Conference of the Italian Society for the Philosophy of Language* (Certosa di Pontignano, Siena, November 2000), *9th National Conference of the Italian Society for the Philosophy of Language* (Noto, October 2002), *6th*

National Conference of the Italian Society for Analytic Philosophy (University of Genoa, September 2004), *Descriptions and Logical Forms, 100 Years of On Denoting* (Padua, December 2004), *33rd Annual Meeting of the Bertrand Russell Society* (University of Iowa, Iowa City, 2006), *International Conference on Analytic Philosophy* (Soochow University, Taipei, Taiwan, 2007), and *The Multiple Uses of the Self* (University of Siena, 2008). I wish to thank all the participants who helped me shape my views on these matters with comments, criticisms and suggestions.

Parts of this book were written while I was on a sabbatical leave at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Iowa, Iowa City (January-July 2006) and at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Cambridge (September–December 2008). I wish to thank both institutions for their wonderful hospitality.

Last but not least, I want to express my love and gratitude to Stefania, Ruggero and Delia for their constant love and support, for their patience when I delved too deeply into this project, and, when all is said and done, for just being around.

Macerata, Italy

Francesco Orilia

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