

Was Searle's Descriptivism Refuted?

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RESUMEN

Se piensa generalmente que la teoría del racimo de Searle acerca del sentido de los nombres propios fue contundentemente refutada por Kripke en *Naming and Necessity*. Este artículo desafía esa extendida creencia, y argumenta que las observaciones hechas por Kripke no muestran que la versión de Searle del descriptivismo sea falsa. De hecho la teoría de Searle, interpretada caritativamente, conserva una considerable plausibilidad.

ABSTRACT

It is generally thought that Searle's cluster theory of the sense of a proper name was soundly refuted by Kripke in *Naming and Necessity*. This paper challenges this widespread belief, and argues that the observations made by Kripke do not show that Searle's version of descriptivism is false. Indeed, charitably interpreted, Searle's theory retains considerable plausibility.

On re-reading Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*, I was surprised to come across an invalid inference at the heart of Kripke's objections to Searle's cluster theory of the sense of a proper name. Searle, you may remember, once suggested that "it is a necessary fact that Aristotle has the logical sum, inclusive disjunction, of properties commonly attributed to him" [Searle (1958), p.172]. Kripke responded that such a suggestion must clearly be false because most of the things commonly attributed to Aristotle are things Aristotle might not have done at all [Kripke (1972/1980) p.61]. But this observation, though it may be true, does not refute Searle's suggestion. First, we should clear up a little slide in Kripke's account of Searle's claim. Searle spoke of properties commonly attributed to Aristotle. These presumably included such general properties as being a man and being an Athenian. Kripke speaks of things Aristotle might have done. But, even if we read Kripke as claiming that most of the properties commonly attributed to Aristotle are properties which he might not have had, Kripke's observation does not engage with Searle's claim. This is clear if we translate into modal logic. Searle claimed the following:

$$(1) \quad \Box (a=\text{Aristotle} \rightarrow (P_1a \vee P_2a \vee P_na)),$$

where the $P_1, \dots, P_n$ are the properties commonly attributed to Aristotle¹. Kripke responds that most of the things that are commonly attributed to Aristotle are things that might not have been true of Aristotle. This is weaker than the following, which amounts to the claim that all of the things that are commonly attributed to Aristotle are things that might not have been true of Aristotle:

$$(2) \quad \Diamond (a=\text{Aristotle} \ \& \ \neg P_1a) \ \& \ \Diamond (a=\text{Aristotle} \ \& \ \neg P_2a) \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ \Diamond (a=\text{Aristotle} \ \& \ \neg P_na).$$

But to think that the truth of (2) implies the falsity of (1) is tantamount to thinking that:

$$(3) \quad \Box (x=x \rightarrow (Px \vee \neg Px))$$

can be shown to be false in virtue of the truth of:

$$(4) \quad \Diamond (x=x \ \& \ \neg Px) \ \& \ \Diamond (x=x \ \& \ \neg\neg Px).$$

What Kripke needed to show, if he was to refute Searle's suggestion was that:

$$(5) \quad \Diamond (a=\text{Aristotle} \ \& \ (\neg P_1a \ \& \ \neg P_2a \ \& \ \dots \ \& \ \neg P_na))$$

That is to say, it might have been that case that all of the things that we commonly attribute to Aristotle are not true of him. However, he never satisfactorily shows this. Indeed, it seems highly improbable that someone should be Aristotle and none of the things commonly attributed to him should apply. What could make us think that someone was Aristotle, but not a man, for instance? Well, we might discover that a woman was the author of all those books, and teacher of Alexander the Great, but we would do this against the background of having used other attributes in the cluster of commonly attributed properties in order to identify Aristotle.

Still, Kripke only says that most of the properties commonly attributed to Aristotle are things that might not have been true of him, so it may seem that the above argument does not apply. The problem with this way out is that even if it is true that most of the properties commonly attributed to Aristotle are things that might not have been true of him, this is compatible with its being necessary that at least some of the things that are attributed to Aristotle are true of him. Moreover, Kripke's strategy is to show of each (non-essential) property commonly attributed to Aristotle that it might not have been true of him.

Perhaps it will be thought that the case of Jonah, which Kripke discusses, is a counterexample to Searle's claim, but it is not. In the case of Jonah, most of the things that are commonly attributed to Jonah do not hold of anyone. When scholars say that despite this, Jonah did exist, they are identifying Jonah via the fact that he has more of the attributes which make up the common cluster than any other person. There was a prophet of about the right period, and if we assume, as we should, that these attributes are part of the cluster, then in this case too some of the things commonly attributed to Jonah are true of the person that scholars claim to be Jonah. If we read Searle's cluster theory in this way, no counter-example to (1) is forthcoming.

Kripke's purported refutation of Searle is therefore invalid, but this seems not to have been widely noticed. I surmise that this is because the cluster theory of descriptions is taken to be such a non-starter that it hardly matters if one objection to it is not quite sound. If one assumes that the cluster theory is a notational variant of Russell's description theory of proper names, then it clearly is a non-starter. Russell is interpreted as having suggested that the logical form of "Aristotle loved dogs" is:

$$(6) \quad \exists!x (Dx \ \& \ \text{Loved dogs } x)$$

where D is some description which uniquely identifies Aristotle. If we replace D with the disjunction of properties commonly attributed to Aristotle we get the hopeless:

$$(7) \quad \exists!x ((P_1x \vee P_2x \vee \dots \vee P_nx) \ \& \ \text{Loved dogs } x)$$

which will in general be false since there will not be a unique satisfier of this disjunctive property. But Searle never suggested anything as silly as this.

Since Kripke wrote *Naming and Necessity* it has become commonplace to note that Frege's introduction of the idea that expressions have sense runs together a number of different notions [Burge (1977); Green (1985); Oppy (1992)]. In order to interpret Searle charitably we ought to ascertain which element of the notion of sense the cluster theory was intended to capture. It is clear from reading Searle that what he is primarily interested in giving is an account of how we determine the referent of a name. He says:

To ask after the criteria for applying the name "Aristotle" is to ask in the formal mode what Aristotle is; it is to ask for a set of identity criteria for the object Aristotle. "What is Aristotle?" and "What are the criteria for applying the name 'Aristotle'?" ask the same question, the former in the material mode, and the latter in the formal mode of speech [Searle (1958), p. 171].

But he does not think that giving an account of the way we determine the referent of a name amounts to adopting Russell's theory of logical form. In fact, he explicitly says: "[Proper names] function not as descriptions, but as pegs on which to hang descriptions" [Searle (1958), p. 172]. Searle is working within the framework of Frege's theory of sense, and is not adapting Russell's theory of logical form. We should remember that Russell's theory was not intended to be a theory of sense at all. He hoped to do away with Fregean senses in favour of propositional functions, so he made it part of the logical form of a sentence containing a name that it involved a definite description. It is implausible to think of Frege's theory of sense as a theory of logical form. Rather, it was a theory about our understanding of expressions, which attempted to account for the difference in information potentially conveyed by sentences which, at some level of analysis, have the same logical form.

Still, it might be thought, this minor slip is unimportant, since Kripke's later arguments do show that descriptivism is untenable. But do they? First, we can put aside all those arguments which are designed to show that the descriptions that a speaker actually associates with a name fail to uniquely identify the referent. All these arguments assume that a descriptivist will accept that there is one sense which is both known by every competent speaker and which determines reference. Frege may have thought this. Searle did not. In speaking of the way we identify the referent of "Aristotle" Searle suggests that this is via the properties commonly attributed to him. Discovering which properties these are might take some research. The full cluster need not be known by all, or even most, language users, but will be implicit in the communal use of the name. There is, moreover, nothing to stop a descriptivist from adopting Putnam's notion of the linguistic division of labour so as to give greater weight to those properties commonly attributed by experts than to others. Nothing that Searle says suggests that the cluster which determines reference will be known by every competent speaker. Indeed, in speaking of the analyticity of identity statements, Searle implies that different speakers will associate different descriptions with a name. So, a descriptivist need not identify the linguistic sense, which determines reference, with the sense for a speaker of a name, and there is little reason to attribute such an identification to Searle.

Secondly, those arguments which are designed to show that the referent of a name need not satisfy the majority, or weighted majority, of the predicates in the cluster, miss their mark. Searle makes no such claim, suggesting that "what precise conditions constitute the criteria for applying 'Aristotle' is not yet laid down by the language" [Searle (1958), p. 173]. This seems right since there is plenty of scope for debate over whether names like "Penthesilia" or "King Arthur" refer, and there is debate over what would count as proving that they do refer. At most we can be certain that a necessary condition for something to turn out to be the referent of one of these names is that

some of the properties commonly attributed to the referent do hold of that person. This was what Searle originally claimed. I conclude therefore that Kripke has not refuted Searle's version of the cluster theory of the sense of proper names.

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NOTES

¹ Some care needs to be taken over formulating what counts as a property commonly attributed to a person. If all the properties possession of which is a logical consequence of the possession of some property explicitly attributed to a thing count as properties attributed to that thing then properties such as being self-identical will count and (1) will be trivially true. So, "properties commonly attributed" should be read as excluding those properties which would be attributed to anything which exists. I am grateful to Lloyd Humberstone for bringing this to my attention.

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