INFERENTIALISM AND THE MEANING OF NON-DENOTING TERMS

By Andrew Jorgensen, University of Leeds, a.jorgensen@leeds.ac.uk

INFERENTIALISM AND NON-DENOTING TERMS

Russell said that a logical theory may be tested by its capacity for dealing with puzzles.[1] Then as now the puzzle was to account for the obvious meaningfulness of non-denoting expressions, such as 'the present King of France'. Non-denoting expressions present a serious challenge to any account of the meaning of proper names. Does the new kid on the block, Robert Brandom's inferentialist theory of meaning, have the resources to explain the meaningfulness of non-denoting expressions?

At the risk of over simplifying, the meaningfulness of non-denoting singular terms is only a problem if you believe that the meaning of an expression is its referent (or essentially involves its referent).[2] Since all non-denoting singular terms are identical with respect to their referents, they must all mean the same thing viz. nothing. It is not obvious that they do all mean the same thing; in fact different non-denoting singular terms (e.g. 'Vulcan,' 'Father Christmas') seem to mean different things. There has been a recent redoubling of efforts to find an acceptable Millian solution to the problem of empty names, and although some progress has been made success is still a long way off.[3] For a traditional Fregean, the meaning of a singular term is its sense, and the expression is non-denoting if this sense does not determine a referent. One advantage this solution affords is a uniform treatment of the meaningfulness of all proper names. Nevertheless, many find traditional Fregeanism implausible. It is not my intention to discuss the justice of this dismissive attitude here[4] instead I intend to push on and consider what might be an alternative solution to the problem.

On the face of it, inferentialism may be the solution we are looking for. It does not exploit reference as an explanatory primitive so, presumably, whatever explains the meaningfulness of denoting singular terms ought to be available to explain the meaningfulness of non-denoting ones too. Inferentialism looks to normative social linguistic practices for the foundations of meaning. Is it possible that the cultural and linguistic contexts in which the use of non-denoting singular terms is embedded can provide the resources for explicating the meaning of these terms? I take it that this is what we pre-theoretically recognise when we think about the meaning of names like 'Sherlock Holmes,' 'Father Christmas' and so on. Somehow the meaning of these words comes from their appropriate connection to a certain story or myth. Were it not for these stories the names would not be names at all!

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[1] He said it in "On Denoting" (1971, p.47)

[2] Such as the object-involving senses of the neo-Fregeans (for example, John McDowell 'On the sense and reference of a proper name, reprinted in his (1998)).

[3] E.g Braun 1993, Adams 2003, Adams & Dietrich 2003, Adams Fuller & Stecker 1997, Reimer 2001, Taylor 2000. For a critique of this research programme see Everett 2003.

[4] Or the strengths and weaknesses of the (neo-) Fregean programme. For a neo-Fregean attempt to deal with non-denoting expressions see Sainsbury 2001.

This last (provocative) modal claim brings me to a couple of important procedural/methodological points I want to make before presenting my inferentialist account of the meaning of non-denoting singular terms. First, we need a criterion for *what counts as giving the meaning of a non-denoting singular term* I shall adopt the following criterion: One has given the meaning of a singular term when one's provided such information as to individuate it as a singular term. I recognise that there are indeed concerns as to whether this is a sufficient condition. Surely, if I say " 'Tony Blair' is the singular term consisting of the 20th letter of the alphabet followed by the 15th etc." I have individuated it as a singular term, as a word, without giving its meaning. In fact, this won't do. [6] Words are individuated in part by their meanings. [7] Non-semantic (i.e. morphological, phonemic, and/or syntactic) features do not suffice (though they are required). Is 'Gift' a word? Is 'Furze'? A word is a lexical element of a language. 'Gift' is a word of German because it is the lexical element that means poison. 'Furze' also has different meanings in English and German. Only as interpreted can we identify it as a word. Homonyms in English highlight this. There are two words spelled 'bank' in English. Phonemic, morphological, syntactical criteria do not distinguish them; only their meanings do. The expression 'Sherlock Holmes' *uninterpreted* might occur though the Arthur Conan Doyle stories did not. This would not show that 'Sherlock Holmes' as it is actually interpreted could occur without the stories. Applied to this case, the criterion I propose to use is that we've specified the meaning of 'Sherlock Holmes' (as we understand it), once we give the individuation conditions for *it as a singular term*, i.e. not just as an expression, an uninterpreted symbol, but as we in fact use it.

I am contemplating an inferentialist account of the meaningfulness of non-denoting terms. The explanatory strategy I have in mind sees their meaning deriving from the 'language games' in which they occur. When I say 'language game' I mean something like a normative social linguistic practice governing the use of a word. Perhaps the myth of Father Christmas and associated activities (meeting Father Christmas at the shopping centre, leaving out some whiskey for him on Christmas Eve, etc.) counts as a language game? But 'language game,' 'linguistic practice' are really quite pliant and flexible concepts. It is very unclear how much explanatory work they can do until we have a firmer grasp on them. In the interests of theoretical clarity, I believe it is necessary to identify and fix upon some linguistic practice in advance and independent of any theoretical work we want it to do. Rather than investigating in the abstract whether a normative linguistic practice is the sort of thing that might endow empty singular terms with meaning, I propose to start from the bottom up, beginning with a particular normative linguistic practice. Because of the particular practice chosen here, the non-denoting singular terms I'm going to investigate in this essay are not proper names but a certain kind of label. It isn't certain that the conclusions I draw can be carried over to non-denoting proper names in fiction and other contexts, but I hope my argument in what follows is sufficient to motivate a general explanatory strategy.

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[6] From the perspective adopted here, the identity statement " 'Tony Blair' is the singular term beginning with the 20th letter etc." fails because the definite description does not pick out a unique referent (there being too many such singular terms), and the name ' 'Tony Blair' ' is ambiguous (only some occurrences of these letters form a singular term whose referent is the British Prime Minister in 2003).

THE STATEMENT LABELLING CONVENTION

I'm certain that virtually everyone who reads modern analytic philosophy of language will be familiar with what I call the *Statement Labelling Convention* (SLC). I am referring to the practice of setting a statement apart on its own line and prefixing it with some manner of label, usually a numeral, by means of which one may refer back to the statement later in one's essay. [8] One does this sometimes to refer to the sentence itself (such as to call it e.g. alliterative), or to the proposition expressed by the sentence (such as to say e.g. that Gallileo believed it). The sentences (1) - (6) below serve as an illustration of the SLC, but they are also deviant in a way I suggest shows how a normative linguistic practice can endow empty labels with meaning.

(1) Meinong was almost blind.
(2) Meinong was born in Lvov.
(3) Meinong first trained as a historian.
(4)
(5) Meinong was Ritter von Handschuhsheim, although he did not use the title.
(6) Meinong was a student of Brentano.

Here we have some interesting facts about Meinong, but what is more interesting is the puzzling behaviour of '(4).' Consider:

(7) (4) is missing.
(8) (4) is about Meinong.

(7) seems to be akin to a negative existential statement ('There is no (4)', '(4) does not exist'). Evaluating (8) seems to involve us in the problem of apparent reference to non-existents. Moreover '(4)' also seems to license existential generalisation. [9] (9) seems to follow from (7) and (8).

(9) Something that is about Meinong is missing.

It seems to me incontrovertible that '(4)' is a meaningful label. It's incontrovertible that (7) and (8) are meaningful propositions. I think (7) is obviously true. I don't know whether (8) is true or not, but (9) is true if (8) is. I'm treating these intuitions as my basic data. It was mentioned above that uses of the SLC sometimes discuss the sentence labelled, sometimes they discuss the proposition expressed by that sentence. (7) discusses a missing sentence whereas (8) discusses a missing proposition (or, if you're

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[7] This is stressed by Geach 1957, p.86/7 (cited by McDowell 1998 p.68).

[8] I'm not proposing to give an explicit statement of the necessary and sufficient conditions for following this convention. I simply assume that the practice itself is well understood and that competent users of it will recognise it in operation in this essay and will also, on reflection, see that it is being adhered to in spite of the anomalous behaviour of '(4).'

[9] If (4) does not exist, this had better be called 'particular generalisation' rather than 'existential generalisation'.

uncomfortable with propositions, (8) discusses a sentence with, as it were, respect to its interpretation). The question of the truth value of (8) is really tricky, but not so tricky as the call the meaningfulness of (8) into question. [10] Here's a couple of intuition pumps to motivate the initial intuitions I claim as data.

Intuition Pump for (7): The Copy Editor

Isn't (7) what you would want someone, say a copyeditor, to say if something like the (4) case was accidental? "(4) is missing" is meaningful because it sounds like something you actually might say under certain circumstances (such as when you are a copy-editor unsure of an author's consistency, or when you are a historian commenting on the deteriorated state of some ancient text. In these cases, exactly what might ground your judgement is the operation of the SLC in the text taken together with some mismatch as above in the case of (4).)

Intuition Pump for (8): The Historian

Similarly for (8); it is must be significant because someone (a historian) could easily find themselves saying it. The historian presumably reasons abductively to a sentence that best explains certain other features of the text or coheres well with what we know about the manuscript's origins, the author etc. etc.

Consider this more concrete example from the Anglo Saxon poem *The Seafarer*. The Anglo-Saxon poetic line normally consists of two half lines, conventionally called a and b, with an alliterative link between the two half-lines. Modern editions of Anglo Saxon poetry number every line. Line 16b is missing from *The Seafarer* though from the context we know it is about the miseries of the exile on the sea.

> _æt se mon ne wat, / _e him on foldan fægrost limpe_, / hu ic earmcearig iscealdne sæ / winter wunade wræccan lastum / winemægum bidroren, * * * / bihongen hrimgicelum; hægl scurum fleag. / (*The Seafarer* lines 12b to 17b taken from *Sweet's Anglo Saxon Reader*, p.166)
>
> "The man for whom all goes well on land does not know how I have dwelt wretched on the ice cold sea in the paths of exile in winter, deprived of dear kinsmen, * * * hung with icicles. hail flew in showers" [11]

As it is common in Old English poetry to offer several descriptions of the same thing, we can be confident of the general character of the missing half-line. One scholar, Ettmüller, supplied 'wynnum beloren' as the content of the missing half line, which means deprived of joys (Ettmuller is cited in *Sweet's Anglo Saxon Reader*, p.277). In this particular case, there is no damage to this part of the manuscript, but we know from the rules of Old English poetry that a half-line should be there. There

[10] In the conclusion I will make some cautionary statements about how this account interacts with the notion of truth. To anticipate, I think that a correspondence account would be ruled out if sentences like (8) could be true. Sentences like (8) might certainly be assertible, however.

[11] Thanks to Alice Cowen for her translation and for drawing this example to my attention.

are various reasons why the half-line could be missing. It is most probably a scribe's error, but it may simply never have existed.

It is significant that the line numbers are a modern invention. They are used to regiment the manuscript to facilitate close analysis, but they can't be thought of as having been guaranteed a reference by the poem's author. Though Ettmüller surely thought that 16b once existed, the evident intelligibility of 'Ettmüller thought that 16b was wynnum beloren' cannot be serve as a premise in a transcendental argument that 16b once existed. That claim and Ettmüller's are intelligible whether or not there ever was a 16b.

To anticipate my eventual conclusion, I think that the correct conclusion to draw from the case of (4) and half-line 16b is that it does not matter, as far as the meaningfulness of (7) through (9) is concerned, whether (4) exists or not. The right thing to say in this case is that '(4)' is a label (possibly) without an object, and that the context is enough to make '(4)' a label without an object. I think that there is a linguistic practice in operation that ensures that '(4)' is meaningful, even though (4) may not exist. We don't have to postulate a referent for it to be meaningful, since its meaningfulness is already explained by examining the linguistic practice. It has a use, so it has a meaning.

META-LINGUISTIC GLOSSES

When thinking about this case (the (4)-case), it is important not to lose sight of the use/mention distinction. (7) and (8) are about (4) not about '(4)'. When using the SLC, one refers to the statement labelled and not the label. When I talk about (1), such as to say that it is of subject-predicate form, or is true, or only contains four words, I am not talking about '(1)'. If I were to talk about '(1)', I would say such things as that it is formed using the left and right parentheses, and the first numeral. It makes no difference that '(4)' is functioning as a non-denoting label. This parallels the situation with non-denoting proper names. The sentence "Sherlock Holmes is more famous than any other detective." is not about a proper name.

Still, it must be said there is some temptation to go metalinguistic in the (4)-case. Surely, (7) *really* means something like (10) or (11).

(10) '(4)' does not refer.

(11) the one referred to by '(4)' is missing.

Meta-linguistic analysis doesn't provide a solution. (10) is true of course, but it is *ad hoc* to say (10) is what (7) really means.[12] (11) cannot be a correct analysis of (7) because (7) is true but (11) must be false because of the unfulfilled definite description. But the main reason a meta-linguistic analysis can't

[12] Since (7) is meaningful there is a prima facie obligation to explain how *just those words* can be meaningful. To say that (7) *really means* (10) shirks this responsibility. A theory that can explain why (7), just those words, is meaningful is preferable to one that glosses it as (10) since the rival needs to explain how a string of letters it counts as nonsense can nevertheless 'really mean' something.

be a competitor with the inferentialist strategy taken here is that it presupposes an explanation of what '(4)'s being a singular term consists in. What does ''(4)'' refer to in (10)? An account is needed of what '(4)'s being a term consists in given that it doesn't refer and we want to explain its meaningfulness. The force of this might be harder to see in the case of (4), but with fictional proper names it is much clearer. Suppose I want to say 'Sherlock Holmes' does not refer as part of a meta-linguistic explanation of some sentence or other. Undoubtedly some token of 'Sherlock Holmes' does refer, but to force the point I've named my mouse pad 'Sherlock Holmes'. One still wants to say that the token of 'Sherlock Holmes' that was originally meant does not refer, but how can we identify that proper name as distinct from other co-typical expressions given that it has no referent? Obviously, the same issues arise for (11) regarding the interpretation of 'the one referred to by '(4)'' (since a constituent of the definite description is a singular term with an *intended* interpretation).

I will pause at this point to consider some possible objections to my proposal. First, it can be objected that the notion of a language-game is notoriously obscure (at the best of times!), and it is unclear just what sort of work I am expecting the notion to do. My response to this is to concede this objection immediately! This is my concern too. The reason for not choosing a regular language game [13] such as telling stories or baptising children is that (I find) these other language games are much harder to get an independent grip on. By raising the SLC as a topic of discussion I have just reminded us of a convention we were all already aware of in any case. Also, if the SLC is not a language-game as that term may be used as a term of art, still it is something, a normative practice, that has the power to endow non-denoting singular terms with meaning.

Still, it can be argued, that it is unclear whether I am actually using the SLC correctly, instead of using it incorrectly, or not at all (perhaps I am really following the rules of a newly created language-game). In response to this, I must insist that I am correctly applying the existing philosophical convention. We can see this, because, given that the statements have been labelled as above, if I didn't refer using '(4)' at all in the rest of the paper, everything would run smoothly, in particular, all the other labels would fill their role perfectly. My use of all the other labels in this paper would be perfectly legitimate. And, when I use '(4)' in sentences I am doing the same sort of thing as when I use '(5),' it is just that with one, I make what I contend to be true statements about (4), and with the other, I may make true statements about (5). So, if the objection is an objection about the actions of the author, rather than about semantics, then we have to say the author is using the regular SLC in the conventional way.

However, it can be objected that my clause "given that the statements have been labelled as above" is precisely the problem. It is precisely because I have made a 'mistake' in labelling the sentences that shows I am not using the SLC correctly (or am using some new convention). Surely, it can be said of me that I should have labelled (5) as '(4)'. So since the numbers are being used as labels, not numbers, '(4)' really just means (5). In response, I claim that it is a mistake to say that, in labelling the sentences as I did, I misapplied the labelling procedure. Someone who inadvertently sets up the SLC in this way

[13] Wittgenstein lists some examples at §23 of the Philosophical Investigations.

may be acting contrary to their intentions, but their behaviour does not contravene the labelling procedure of the SLC. This is because, although we normally use numerals as labels, sometimes letters from the alphabet, this is not demanded by the SLC. It is not demanded by the SLC, because some other labels would equally well serve the goals of efficiency and clarity. Any symbol that is sufficiently recognisable in a suitably sized font will do. Witness, for example, the old style in-text footnotes that were once used, e.g. '*', '†', '‡' . Footnotes play a very similar role to the labels of the SLC, and could, in principle, be used in the SLC. If I had been using the old-style footnote symbols, it would make no sense to say that I mislabelled (5). Now, given that the sentences have the labels they do, I refer to (5) by means of '(5)', and not '(4)'. If we thought that I could refer to (5) by means of '(4)' *that* would misapply the convention! Also, such a case would leave indeterminate how we are to understand what the label '(5)' would then refer to in this paper. In that case, we should have to decide whether a sentence (of this paper) containing '(5)' refers to (5), as '(1)' refers to (1), and '(2)' refers to (2), and '(3)' refer to (3), or whether '(5)' refers to (6), since we a supposing that '(4)' refers to (5). To carry on like this, would clearly be following a different convention. The only way to continue to use the SLC (correctly) is to conclude that '(4)' doesn't refer to anything (or else, it refers to a non-existent object).

A similar objection claims that '(4)' is really equivalent to some definite description, such as 'the thing that comes fourth.' [14] Since '(4)' does not denote any object, then this description is satisfied by what '(5)' denotes. Thus we can discount the objection since if (4) = the thing that comes fourth, then sentences such as "(4) is missing" come out false, since (5) is not missing. But "(4) is missing" is true. More significantly, it would raise questions about how '(5)' was meaningful. If it is a truncated description for what comes fifth, then it is satisfied by (6). As in the preceding paragraph, this misapplies the SLC.

Lastly, The intelligibility of sentences using '(4)' cannot be explained by someone's intending to use it referringly. Any such intention is clearly meta-linguistic in some way, and so the same objection applies: unless '(4)' is already a meaningful expression there is no 'it' with which to intend to refer. I distinguished the issue of the correctness of the author's application of the SLC with the contribution the SLC makes to meaning (i.e. its semantics). The phenomenon falls out of the semantics of the SLC. Putting it informally, my explanation is that something like the close and known association '(4)' bears to '(1)', '(2)', etc reserves for it a place in the system of labels employed in this essay, and allows it to enter into meaningful sentences. And because they are all labels, it makes '(4)' seem to the label of a non-existent object. I think it makes more sense to say that '(4)' is a meaningful term because of its part in SLC, than to say it's meaningless or that it's meaningful because it refers to a non-existent object. The semantic properties of the SLC at least explain how it could be meaningful, but how a label *could* otherwise refer to something that does not exist is still mysterious.

[14] It cannot be equivalent to the definite description 'the one referred to by '(4)', since as was mentioned above, this meta-linguistic analysis presupposes that '(4)' is meaningful. For similar reasons, it cannot be identified with 'the one that plays the (4)-role.' Both these strategies will only work given an antecedent explanation of the meaningfulness of '(4)'.

My general inferentialist proposal is that something similar happens in all other cases where meaningful empty names (singular terms) occur in sentences. Other phenomena similar to the (4)-case are not uncommon. For example, my friend lived in a housing complex in Sheffield that had no apartment 13 (although it had a 12 and a 14 and others). No one would say that the occupants of 14 really lived in 13. The postman delivered letters addressed to '14' to that address, and not to apartment 15. I know someone in New York whose building lacks a 13th floor, although it has a 14th floor (as well as others). I contend that such singular terms gain their meaning from their place in a linguistic practice; a place which is determined by their inferential connections with other elements in the practice that may correspond more directly with elements of the world. However, before it is possible to place too much credence in the SLC solution offered here, I have to spell out in more detail just how the SLC brings it about that '(4)' is meaningful.

BRANDOM'S SEMANTICS

I intend to use the explanatory apparatus of Brandom's theory to explain why "(4) is missing" is meaningful and secondly to explain the semantic contribution of '(4)' to that sentence. Robert Brandom has developed an inferentialist approach to semantics. [15] Inferentialist accounts aim to explain conceptual content and linguistic meaning without appeal to any primitive representational notions, such as reference or truth, and ultimately to provide an account of these very representational relations. The central tenet of inferentialism is that states and acts have conceptual content in virtue of being involved in inferences as premises and conclusions (2000, 46). The significance of a speech-act is how it changes the commitments and entitlements one attributes to others and acknowledges oneself (2000, 81). Understanding a statement or sub-sentential expression consists in knowing what its inferential consequences and antecedents are (2000, 191) and what is incompatible with it. The practice of keeping track of one's own and other people's commitments is called deontic score-keeping.

Discursive commitments (and entitlements) are individuated by their inferential articulation (by what counts as a reason for them, what their consequences are, and what other commitments commitment to them precludes entitlement to). The inferential articulation of conceptual content is a generalisation of Gentzen's strategy for giving the meaning of logical vocabulary. The meanings of the logical constants are given by the corresponding pair of introduction and elimination rules for each constant. The introduction rules specify the sufficient conditions for the applicability of each operator, and the elimination rules specify the necessary conditions for it. This is carried over to non-logical propositional content. The set of necessary conditions for the assertability of a propositionally contentful utterance are, so to speak, the elimination rule for that content, and the set of sufficient conditions are the corresponding introduction rule (2000, 63). The necessary conditions for the applicability of a propositionally contentful utterance are made explicit by the statements inferentially 'downstream' from an utterance, i.e. those utterances or acts or beliefs to which one is committed by commitment to the first utterance. And the sufficient conditions for it are those statements 'upstream' from it from which it may be inferred, and which can be used to justify it (2000, 194). A final

[15] See his (1994) and (2000).

contribution to the inferential articulation of a propositionally contentful utterance is provided by the set of propositionally contentful utterances incompatible with it.

Although sentential meaning is the basic concept, Brandom gives an account of the semantic significance of sub-sentential components too. [16] The central notion in Brandom's analysis of the sub-sentential components of language is that of a substitution inference. Substitution plays both a syntactic and a semantic role. Operating syntactically, substitution of one part of a sentence for another divides sub-sentential expressions into equivalence classes (singular terms and predicates) accordingly as such substitution preserves the well-formedness of sentences. In other words, two sub-sentential expressions belong to the same syntactic class when you cannot change a sentence into something that is not a sentence by substituting one sub-sentential expression for the other.

According to Brandom, two sub-sentential expressions share the same semantic content just in case the pragmatic potential of a sentence is not affected by substituting either for the other in that sentence (2000, 130). A substitution inference is said to materially involve a sub-sentential expression when replacing that expression with other expressions of the same type changes the pragmatic status of the inference (2000, p.133). This substitutional apparatus divides singular terms into equivalence classes, every member of which bears the same semantic content. Predicates, on the other hand, are divided up into reflexive, transitive and asymmetric structures of categories. (2000, 135) This difference comes from the fact that good inferences materially involving singular terms from the same equivalence class are reversible, but reversing an inference materially involving predicates does not always preserve goodness of inference.

In summary then, the semantic content of a sub-sentential expression, according to Brandom, is the set of all Simple Material Substitution Inferential Commitments (SMSICs) that relate it to other expressions (2000, 138). The 'material-substitution-inferential-commitments' part of this acronym was the topic of the preceding paragraph. The 'simple' part relates to that well-known feature of language that synonymous expressions may not always be substituted for each other salva veritate. According to Brandom, a sub-sentential expression has a *primary* semantic occurrence only in non-intensional contexts. Simple Material Substitution Inferential Commitments govern the contribution of a sub-sentential expression exactly in the sentences in which it has a primary occurrence.

The proprieties of novel inferences are governed by the SMSICs of the terms having a primary semantic occurrence in the sentences in that inference (2000, 139). According to Brandom,

> A material substitution-inferential commitment regarding *A* and *A`* is a commitment to the effect that for any *B* such that *AB* is a sentence in which *A* has primary substitution-semantic occurrence, the inference from *AB* to *A`B* is good. Likewise, a material substitution-inferential commitment regarding *B* and *B`* is a commitment to the effect that for any *A* such that *AB* is a sentence, the inference from *AB* to *AB`* is good.

[16] This is necessary to bring his account in to line with the principle of compositionality.

…So, even if no one has ever encountered the sentence *A`B`,* the SMSICs cited above determine a commitment to the propriety of the inference from *AB* to *A`B`*. (1994, 374)

INFERENTIALISM AND THE (4)-CASE [17]

Following Brandom, The propositional content of "(4) is missing" is to be explained in terms of its inferential role, i.e. its ability to serve as a premise and/or a conclusion in theoretical and practical inferences. It is necessary to specify its inferential articulation. To this end, we need to give (theoretical or practical) inferences in which "(4) is missing" appears as the consequent. This tells us when we are committed to "(4) is missing". We also need to give inferences in which "(4) is missing" occurs as antecedent. Finally, it is necessary to specify what is incompatible with "(4) is missing"

Case One: "(4) is missing" as consequent.
This is to ask the question, What can we infer '(4) is missing' from?
It seems to me that we can infer it from the observation that the labels '(1)', '(2)', '(3)', '(4)', and '(5)' all occur in this essay, and that '(1)', '(2)', '(3)', '(5)' are all correlated with some statement or other, but that '(4)' is not.

Case Two: "(4) is missing" as antecedent.
This is to ask the question, What consequences can we draw from '(4) is missing'?
I think we can infer that there has been an error in setting up the conditions necessary for the straight-forward and non-deviant use of the SLC.

Case Three: incompatible with "(4) is missing"
This is to ask what would be incompatible with '(4) is missing'?
Well, just what would be incompatible with "(5) is missing"? Obviously, it is the presence of (5). If I wrote some statement for '(4)' to label, then the observation of this line in the present essay is incompatible with commitment to "(4) is missing". Such an observation would oblige me to retract "(4) is missing" (or contest the observation, for example by calling it a hallucination or denying that it was (4)).

Brandom's general account of linguistic meaning provides a general framework for elucidating the meaning of '(4) is missing', but the SLC language game is necessary to generate the materially good inferences Brandom's theory requires.

THE SEMANTIC SIGNIFICANCE OF '(4)'

To demonstrate the significance of '(4)' it is sufficient to show that '(4)' is materially involved in some materially good inference. There is a slight hurdle to overcome here as it requires my divergence from the official Brandom line. The problem concerns Brandom's test for material involvement. We have to find a case where the pragmatic potential of a materially good inference is affected when some other singular term is substituted into the antecedent. For example, of the two inferences made explicit by the following conditionals, the first is a materially good inference and the second is not.

(12) If Tony Blair is a man, then the husband of Cherie Booth, QC, is a man.

(13) If David Beckham is a man, then the husband of Cherie Booth, QC, is a man.

Since (13) is just like (12) except that it has ‘David Beckham’ in place of ‘Tony Blair’ this tells us that ‘Tony Blair’ is materially involved in the inference. The inferences have the form $F\alpha \rightarrow F\beta$,where α and β are different subject terms, and F is a common predicate term.

We cannot use this paradigm in the case of ‘(4)’, because of the unavailability of singular terms analogous to ‘the husband of Cherie Booth, QC’ for the case of ‘(4)’. Look around. There does not seem to be another term with the same inferential role as ‘(4).’ [18] For example, neither ‘(IV)’, nor ‘(d)’ do. This is because, neither of these other terms is being used in the instance of the SLC in operation in this essay. I do not know what to make of the following inferences

(14) If (4) is missing, then (d) is missing.

(15) If (5) is missing, then (d) is missing.

I am inclined to regard both these inferences as bad, simply because ‘(d)’ most naturally occurs as a label for a contrasting set of statements. [19]

Brandom holds that an object that can be referred to in only one way is not an object at all. Every genuine singular term must be involved in some non-trivial identity statements (1994, 424/5). That is, if ‘*a*’ is a singular term, there must be some term ‘*b*’ distinct from ‘*a*’ such that *a* = *b*. Brandom insists on this as a minimal requirement on being able to recognise an object as the same again.

> Unless the occurrence of a candidate term in the expression of a claim has *some* substitution-inferential significance (unless it commits one to *some* further claim that is expressed by a sentence resulting from the first by substitution of another term for the candidate), then the candidate is not functioning as a singular term at all. Its occurrences are not semantically significant in the way terms are; it is substitutionally idle; thus inferentially idle; and therefore semantically idle to discern its occurrence at all. (1994, 424)

[17] A word of warning is in order. I am ignoring Brandom’s own account of reference (as explained in MIE, AR and ‘Reference Explained Away’). I have reservations about this aspect of his account, but I’ll reserve airing them for another occasion.

[18] Except, perhaps, one of Brandom’s derivative indirect definite descriptions ‘the one denoted by ‘(4)’’, but this is too much like pulling oneself up by one’s own bootstraps. For an account of Brandom’s indirect definite descriptions see his ‘Reference Explained Away’ or MIE chapter 5 section 4.

[19] Calling (14) and (15) bad material inferences raises the question of what makes a material inference good (or bad) on Brandom's account. Since material inferences are explanatory primitives in Brandom's semantics, it cannot be a function of the content of the premise or the conclusion. The status (good or bad) of material inference depends on the attitudes of deontic scorekeepers. It depends on their taking someone who asserts the premise to be committed to the conclusion. Clearly, no one could be committed to "(d) is missing" in the present context, so the inference is bad.

I don’t accept this. Brandom’s insistence amounts to a requirement to have more than one singular term type in any given substitution inference class. However, the substitution inferential commitments and incompatibilities of a singular term can be generated by distinguishing different substitution inference classes among *co-typical* expressions.

Fortunately, there is a mode of inference that will give us the needed test of material involvement. In the course of discussing a different point Frege considers the inference from (16) and (17) to (18). [20]

(16) Napoleon recognised the danger to his right flank.

(17) Napoleon himself lead his guards against the enemy position.

(18) Napoleon, who recognised the danger to his right flank, himself lead his guards against the enemy position.

This is an inference from two statements to an embedding conjunctive transformation. Clearly, this inference is valid, since the transformation will be true if and only if each of the conjuncts is true. [21] However, if we take the sentences

(19) Cambridge is fifty miles from London.

and

(20) Cambridge is a suburb of Boston.

and combine them in apparently the same way we get the false statement

(21) Cambridge, which is a suburb of Boston, is fifty miles from London. [22]

How is this possible? The most plausible explanation seems to be that (21) is *not* a construction out of the other two statements. I assume that (21) has the same subject as at least one of (19) or (20), as well as having the same predicates. If (21) had the same subject as both of (19) and (20), then given the validity of the inference, at least one of (19) or (20) must be false. Since they are both true, (21) cannot have the same subject as both of them, hence (19) and (20) must have distinct subjects. In view of this, we can call inferences like that between (16)+(17) and (18) and between (19)+(20) and (21) homonym detecting inferences.

Schematically we can represent them thus:

[20] From “On Sense and Reference" (2003, page 51).

[21] Of course, (18) carries the pragmatic implication that Napoleon lead his guards against the enemy position *because* he recognised the danger to his right flank. That doesn't affect the validity of the inference though. Gabrielle White drew this to my attention.

[22] I owe the example to Vision (1974).

A is B. A is C. Therefore, A, which is B, is C.

The inference is valid since if the conclusion is false, either A cannot be B or A cannot be C, which by the premises, it is. Hence if the premises are true, so is the conclusion. Only the ambiguous version,

A is B. A* is C. Therefore, A, which is B, is C.

allows a false conclusion. It is possible to suppose that A is not C, since this doesn't contradict A* is C. This is why it is a homonym detecting inference. If the conclusion is false, A and A* cannot mean the same.

Homonym detecting inferences are special cases of substitution inferences as Brandom defines them. Officially, '*a*' is materially involved in an inference if you reject some inferences in which '*a*' has been replaced by (some other term) '*b*'. A homonym detecting inference is a special case where '*a*' is replaced by a co-typical expression. Endorsing a homonym detecting inference is a commitment with deontic significance to be recorded by a deontic scorekeeper. It is not automatic that co-typical expressions will belong to the same substitution inferential equivalence class. Endorsing a homonym detecting inference seems to have just that same force, the same pragmatic potential, as recognising the object as the same again. You are in effect saying here we have A again rather than having A and A*. So there is a relevant test for material commitment: To reject the inference from (22) and (7) to (23) and endorse the inference from (8) and (7) to (24) just is to attribute material content to '(4).' To produce an inference similar to the Cambridge case, where co-typical tokens, do not have the same SMSICs, we need only find another use of the SLC in someone else's paper. For instance, Nathan Salmon used '(4)' to denote "The present King of France does not exist" in his paper "Nonexistence." [23]

(22) (4) appeared in Salmon's paper.

(7) (4) is missing.

which may not be combined to yield

(23) (4), which appeared in Salmon's paper, is missing.

The inference has to be rejected because 'the present King of France does not exist' is not missing (I've typed it twice!) Hence, the inference from "(4) appeared in Salmon's paper." and "(4) is missing." to "(4), which appeared in Salmon's paper, is missing" is bad. Similar to the Napoleon case we have:

(8) (4) is about Meinong.

(7) (4) is missing.

which may both be combined to yield

[23] Salmon 1998, p. 278.

(24) (4), which is about Meinong, is missing.

These considerations show that '(4)' is materially involved in at least some inferences. Therefore, we cannot regard it as a merely formal term. Its meaning is determined by its SMSICs. In contrast with other singular terms, however, there will be, I suspect, no true identity statements materially involving '(4)', (except '(4) = (4)') because it has no synonyms. '(IV)' and '(d)', for example, are not synonyms of '(4)', since they are not defined for the SLC in this essay.

CONCLUSION AND SOME RESERVATIONS

I have tried to give an informal "deduction" of the meaning of a non-denoting label from its role in a given language game. In some respects, it will be easier to explicate the meaning of paradigm non-denoting proper names than it has been with '(4)'. This is because paradigm non-denoting proper names are involved in non-trivial identity statements, and so it will be easier to demonstrate their material contribution to certain inferences. Sherlock Holmes is the detective who lives with Dr Watson. Pegasus is the winged horse that bore Bellerophon against the Amazons and so on. To implement the inferentialist strategy outlined in this essay with respect to these names we need to suppose that there are language games underlying their use and generating the inferential connections Brandom's theory requires. Several writers have recognised the importance of source stories for our use of proper names in fiction, [24] but it has also been pointed out that fictional characters can pop up outside these source stories. [25] The inter-textual nature of much fiction will make isolating the relevant language games extremely difficult if not impossible.

I think the view outlined above has some merits as an account of the cognitive significance of statements that apparently involve reference to non-existent objects. I think it gets some of the pre-theoretical data right (it is not meta-linguistic, but it is a possible way of fleshing out students' views that Pegasus is in some sense just a name, but not a name of anything, i.e. that it is purely conceptual). In spite of this, several things trouble me about the view I have outlined. First, there are some hard questions to be answered about how statements involving genuinely non-denoting terms can be true. For instance, I argued that '(4) is missing' is true. If '(4)' is genuinely non-denoting, how can this be true? What is the truth-maker for statements involving non-denoting terms? What theory of truth are we using here? It can't be the correspondence conception, since if the terms are genuinely non-denoting there will be 'gaps' in the facts the statements are supposed to correspond to (and gappy propositions expressed by these statements). These objections could be answered, perhaps, by endorsing a pro-sentential or otherwise deflationary theory of truth, as Brandom does, and by rejecting talk of Russellian propositions in favour of talk of meaningful statements. Nevertheless, these are big commitments to get drawn into solely on account of an understanding of the semantic significance of non-denoting terms.

[24] Zalta 2003, Deutsch 2000, Parsons 1980
[25] Parsons 1980, p.51.

Some might think that because inferentialism can provide an account of the semantic significance of non-denoting terms, this shows it can't be properly tied down to the world enough and therefore that it does not even account for the semantic significance of denoting terms. This would be too quick. The primary locus of semantic significance for inferentialism is the sentence. For there to be empirical content, a language game must be connected with the real world, but this connection doesn't have to be there in virtue of a one-to-one connection between its smallest parts (words) and elements of the world. These are large questions for which I don't have worked out answers. All I hope to have accomplished is to have convinced the reader that there is an interesting possible account of the meanings of non-denoting proper names to be had here, and that it is worth investigating further.

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