

Searle: “Proper Names and Intentionality”

Searle’s Account Of The Problem

In this essay, Searle emphasizes the notion of ‘Intentional content’, rather than the ‘cluster of descriptions’ that Kripke uses to characterize Searle’s position.

Searle’s central position is that “linguistic reference is always dependent on or is a form of mental reference” (p. 326), and mental reference is in virtue of Intentional content.

To the old question “Do names have senses?” there have been, according to Searle, two competing answers: (1) the descriptivist theory, and (2) the causal theory. Searle finds both labels misleading.

Descriptivist theory

There are four things wrong with the crude (read “Kripke’s”) account of descriptivism:

1. It need not hold that proper names must be analyzed exclusively in general terms.
2. It need not even hold that analyses of names must be given in *words* at all.
3. There need not be a ‘dossier’ associated with each name—pointing may be sufficient.
4. The “privacy of his own room” picture of naming that Kripke gives is entirely inaccurate—no descriptivist has ever espoused such a view.

Causal theory

This theory, Searle says, should really be called the “external causal chain of communication theory” (p. 327). Throughout the article, Searle keeps emphasizing the *external*. The idea presumably is that the causes invoked should be **independent** of the internal mental states of the users of the name. Indeed, whenever he can show that there must be an appeal to some intentional notion (content, speaker’s intentions, etc.), Searle claims that the theory in question is no longer an *external* causal theory and is really a disguised form of descriptivism.

This suggests to me that Searle is attacking a straw man. Apart from Michael Devitt (“Singular Terms,” *JPhil*, 1974) no proponent of a “causal” theory has insisted that the causal relation appealed to in an account of naming must be “external” or “ordinary physical” causation. Kripke, for example, is quite explicit in saying that the causal factors include “intentions to refer.” And, as we’ll see, the “descriptive” content that Searle insists must be present in every use of names almost always involves, directly or indirectly, a causal component.

Causal vs. Descriptivist Theories

Causal Theories

Searle insists that a causal theory’s notion of causation:

“must not be descriptivist, it must not be internal, otherwise the causal theory is just a variant of the descriptivist theory” (p. 331, left).

The causation implied in such descriptions as “the man I am able to *recognize as* Baxter or the man to whom I was *introduced as* Baxter, or the man whom I *saw baptize* as Baxter” (p.331, left) is “Intentional causation.” This means that it cannot be accounted for in purely “external” or “physical” causal terms—some “intentional” component is essentially involved (e.g., reference to a belief or other mind-directed-toward-object activity or state).

But as this was never a part of the causal theorist’s aim, Searle’s criticism is misguided.

Descriptivist Theories

On the other hand, Searle is probably right that proponents of causal theories have given misleading and unsympathetic characterizations of descriptivism. Just as Searle tries to force all causal theorists into the “external causation” mode, so too Kripke has tried to present descriptivism in a most unflattering light. Kripke’s descriptivist seems to think that the cluster of descriptions corresponding to a proper name can all be given in **purely qualitative** terms. Such a theory is indeed flawed, but Searle never proposed that.

Searle’s response to counterexamples

Searle thinks that the counterexamples all ignore the “total Intentional content” and what Searle calls the “Network” and the “Background” (p. 336). We’ll look at a couple of these responses.

The Gödel-Schmidt Case

Searle claims that Kripke has ignored some of the speaker's Intentional content. In addition to "the author of the proof of the incompleteness of arithmetic," the speaker can provide descriptions like "the man called 'Gödel' in my linguistic community." (Searle calls this 'parasitic Intentional content'.) And whereas the first description picks out Schmidt, not Gödel, the parasitic one succeeds in picking out Gödel.

This will take care of one of the roles of Fregean senses: it fits the right object—it tells what the denotation of the name is. But it doesn't take care of the other role: a sense should also **fix the reference** of the name in the sense that it tells us **how to pick out** the denotation. The description that gives us only the parasitic Intentional content is useless in performing that role. There is no real "content" here—only the speaker's hope that he is referring to whomever he is supposed to be referring to when he uses that name. Nothing Searle says shows that the parasitic Intentional content is not parasitic on a causal account of how the name is attached to its denotation.

Modal Arguments

Searle comments directly (p. 339 left) on the "rigid designator" argument against his theory. The argument holds that (1) proper names are rigid, (2) definite descriptions are not rigid, and that therefore (3) "proper names are not equivalent in meaning or sense or functioning to definite descriptions or Intentional contents of any sort" (p. 339 right).

Searle's response: grants (1), rejects (2). There are two objections to (2).

- Some definite descriptions are rigid (e.g., "any definite description that expresses identity conditions for the object").
- "Any definite description at all can be treated as a rigid designator by indexing it to the actual world."

The first objection begs the question, since it assumes that there **are** (necessary and sufficient) conditions of identity for the object. (Apart from necessary objects—numbers, etc.—it is not clear that there are such conditions. Indeed, the idea that such conditions are problematic is part of the idea for the attack on the descriptivist theory.)

The second objection is based on a true claim: one can, by fiat, "rigidify" a definite description. But the fact that it was David Kaplan—a direct reference theorist—who first made this observation ("Dthat") should give one reason to suspect that it cannot be used in defense of descriptivism.

For the idea behind descriptivism is that the descriptive content of a name becomes part of the proposition expressed by a sentence containing the name. But when one “rigidifies” a description, it is not the semantic content of the description **but the object denoted** that becomes part of the proposition expressed.

Example: rigidify ‘the inventor of bifocals’ as Kaplan suggests, so that it always denotes Franklin. In that case, the proposition expressed by the sentence ‘The actual inventor of bifocals was American’ contains **Franklin** as a constituent. When we evaluate that sentence with respect to a given context of evaluation (possible world), we don’t use the semantic content of the description in our evaluation. We use the item that description denotes in the actual world.

This shows that when a description is rigidified, it loses its semantic content with respect to the context in which its being evaluated. So it no longer functions as a Fregean sense is supposed to function.

What is the causal theory?

Causal theories (apart from Devitt’s) allow “Intentional causation” — e.g., the causal factors involved include such intentional states as *intending to refer*. This is clear from Kripke’s account of the role of initial baptisms:

A speaker introduces a name into the language by dubbing or baptizing some object. That is to say, she uses a name *with the intention that it should refer* to that object. No causality is yet involved. So where does it come in? In the relation between that use and subsequent uses. The causal chain is a **chain of communication**, and hence is intended to explain how the reference of a proper name is **passed on**, not how it is **established** in the first place. The causal explanations are “**historical** explanations, not **semantic** analyses” (Genoveva Martí, “A Question of Rigidity in New Theories of Reference,” *Noûs* 37 (2003) 166).

This means that Searle and the causal theorists are talking past one another. They accuse him of holding a form of descriptivism (“purely qualitative descriptivism,” one might call it) that he doesn’t hold. He accuses them of insisting on a kind of causation (“purely external causation”) that was never part of their causal “picture” (remember: Kripke never called it a theory!).

So Searle and the causal theorists **agree** that there are causal, historical, chains of communication, in which names get handed down from person to person, from one generation to the next.

The key question is: what is it that is getting handed down? Clearly, it is not just the name—it is the name plus something else that is conventionally associated with it. This is the point that distinguishes Searle and Frege, on the one hand, from Kripke and Donnellan (et al) on the other.

- Frege and Searle: what is conventionally associated with a name is a **sense** (or description, or cluster of descriptions, or way of picking something out).
- Kripke et al: what is conventionally associated with a name is an **object**.

Direct Reference

It turns out, then, that the dispute over causal theories is a red herring. Both Searle and his critics require causal chains of communication; and both require intentional components (the intention to refer). The key question is: **how are names connected to their referents?** In the case of Frege, there is an intermediary—a *sense*. For Searle, “objects are not given to us prior to our system of representation” (p. 326), and so our *representations* intervene between name and referent.

On the other side (Mill, Kripke, Donnellan, Kaplan, et al): the connection is unmediated—names are **directly referential**. The dispute is not between descriptivist and causal theories, but between Fregean and Direct Reference theories. So we turn next to one of the leading proponents of the (so-called) New Theory of Reference, David Kaplan. His study focuses on another linguistic device that the New Theory holds to be directly referential—indexicals.