

PHIL 4233: Philosophy of Language
Prof. Funkhouser
Evans, “The Causal Theory of Names”

I.

1.

- Evans distinguishes *what the speaker denotes* from *what the name denotes*. There are *two* description theories, one corresponding to each kind of denotation. Evans alleges that Kripke does not distinguish between these. Roughly, the difference between the two theories is that in the former reference is determined by the cluster of properties one individual associates with the name, and with the latter reference is determined by the cluster of properties a group of speakers associates with the name.

- Evans says of the latter theory:

The theory is by no means committed to the thesis that every user of the name must be in possession of the description; just as Kripke is not committed to holding that every user of the expression “one meter” knows about the meter rod in Paris by saying that its reference is fixed by the description “Length of stick S in Paris.”

Evans claims that Kripke’s attacks in *N&N* miss this second theory.

- Evans claims that it is “outrageous” to hold that descriptions alone provide sufficient conditions for reference. Rather: “It is the weaker thesis — that some descriptive identification is necessary for a speaker to denote something — that it is important to understand.”

- But Evans denies this weaker thesis too. This weaker thesis has two components:

1. “First: that in order to be saying something by uttering an expression one must utter the sentence with certain intentions.”

2. “Secondly — and this is where the underpinning from a certain Philosophy of Mind becomes apparent — to have an intention or belief concerning some item (which one is not in a position to

demonstratively identify) one must be in possession of a description uniquely true of it.”

- But we often use words (meaningfully) without fully understanding them, and certainly without knowing their satisfaction conditions — e.g., ‘Microbiologist’, ‘chlorine’, and ‘nicotine’.

Note the characterization of “The Philosophy of Mind”.

- Evans agrees with Kripke and Wittgenstein, among others, that there may be nothing “in the mind” in virtue of which some psychological state is about object x , rather than object y .

2.

- Evans’ example in support of the Kripkean intuition (anti-descriptivism) about names:

A group of people are having a conversation in a pub, about a certain Louis of whom S has never heard before. S becomes interested and asks: “What did Louis do then?” There seems to be no question but that S denotes a particular man and asks about him.

- But Evans objects that Kripke’s causal theory is not as sensitive to conversational context as it should be — e.g., the “Louis was a basketball player” example.

- Another counter-example to the Kripkean theory:

Suppose for example on a T.V. quiz program I am asked to name a capital city and I say “Kingston is the capital of Jamaica”; I should want to say that I had said something strictly and literally true even though it turns out that the man from whom I had picked up this scrap of information was actually referring to Kingston-upon-Thames and making a racist observation.

- Note the “mouthpiece syndrome”, as well as Evans’ comments about the connections between denoting and believing.

- Kripke’s causal theory can also serve to resolve apparent ambiguities in speech.

3.

- Study the first paragraph of this section.

- Changes in denotation do occur — e.g., the case of babies switched shortly after birth, but after they have each been named.

It looks as though, once again, the intentions of the speakers to use the name to refer to something must be allowed to count in determination of what it denotes.

4.

- Evans' agreement with Kripke:

There is something absurd in supposing that the intended referent of some perfectly ordinary use of a name by a speaker could be some item utterly isolated (causally) from the user's community and culture simply in virtue of the fact that it fits better than anything else the cluster of descriptions he associates with the name. I would agree with Kripke in thinking that the absurdity resides in the absence of any causal relation between the item concerned and the speaker.

- We should expect there to be a causal component to denotation, just as there is for seeing.

- *But*, Evans disagrees with Kripke over the relevant causal relation. It is not a causal connection to an initial baptism that is relevant, claims Evans, but a causal relation to "the speaker's body of information."

- Also, there is another parallel with seeing. Just as we do not see an object if it is too distorted, we do not refer to an object if our descriptions do not fit it to some minimal degree.

II.

5.

- Evans' modest endeavor: to give an account of the denotations of names that allows for and explains changes in their denotations.

- Evans' technical distinction between *reference* and *denotation*:

One may refer to x by using a description that x does not satisfy; one may not thus denote x .

- This is the distinction, once again, between speaker referent and semantic referent.

Now a speaker may know or believe that there is such-and-such an item in the world and intend to refer to it. And this is where the suggestion made earlier must be brought to bear, for *that* item is not (in general) the satisfier of the body of information the possession by the speaker of which makes it true that he knows of the existence of the item; it is rather that item which is

causally responsible for the speaker's possession of that body of information, or dominantly responsible if there is more than one.

- *Source* and *dominance* examples: French cigarettes, Godel, the legs of the wife of a colleague, the switched twins, and Napoleon.
- Evans offers sufficient conditions for 'NN' naming x in community C .
- Evans accuses Kripke's theory of names as having an element of magic: the Goldilocks and Dead Sea examples are supposed to show this.
 - If a community of speakers uses a name to refer to x , they will react with indifference (e.g., not change their usage) to the discovery that the name originally referred to y . Change of denotation is possible.
- deferential use: deferring to the use of a term as intended by another person or community of people.
- Concluding example: Turnip.

Conclusion

6.

- Evans thinks that his conclusions should be welcomed by both the descriptivist and causal theorist.