

On to our next unit: the semantics of names.

Two Questions about Names

1) What is the semantic value of a name?

In our unit on compositional semantics, we saw that the meaning of any word is the contribution it makes to (a determinant of) propositional content. What do names help contribute to propositions? The answer may look different depending on the kind of propositional content we posit, but we will see that we may be able to place some universal constraints on a correct answer.

2) What *determines* the semantic value of a name?

How did the word “Jones” come to be associated with the semantic value it has (whatever that is) rather than, say, the semantic value we associated with other words?

This second question is one in...

Metasemantics: the study of how word types get the semantic properties they have.

Descriptivism

Let's start with the first question: What is the semantic value of a name?

Recall our ever-recurring puzzle.

- (1) Lois thinks Superman can fly.
- (2) Lois thinks Clark Kent can fly.

Now we were supposing we could say something like

Semantic value of “Clark Kent” = Semantic value of “Superman” = Superman/Clark Kent

The problem with this in light of our compositional machinery is obvious. The semantic values of the other words in the sentence are the same. So it seems like the semantic value of the who sentences should be the same. That is the propositions expressed by the sentences should be the same. And they should have the same truth values. This is one of the many issues that led to...

Descriptivism: the semantic value of a name is (often) the same as the semantic value of some definite description.

Russell held this view explicitly, and it has been attributed to Frege as well.

But what is the semantic value of a definite description? It would be useless to appeal to descriptivism to solve our problem if the semantic values of coreferring definite descriptions could be the same (then we'd fall back into the same difficulties). So usually the descriptivist also thinks:

(*) *Co-referring definite descriptions may have different semantic values.*

How does this help? Review: Let's say "Superman" has the same semantic value as "the superhero of Metropolis" and "Clark Kent" has the same semantic value as "the mild mannered reporter for the Daily Planet". Then (1) and (2) express the same propositions as (3) and (4).

(3) Lois thinks the superhero of Metropolis can fly.

(4) Lois thinks the mild mannered reporter for the Daily Planet can fly.

Why? Because of the principle of compositionality together with the descriptivist hypothesis. Now if we add that the descriptions have different semantic values (as seems plausible) then both (3) and (4), and *hence* (1) and (2) express different propositions.

Two Varieties of Descriptivism

A descriptivist view isn't complete without saying at least *what kinds of descriptions* act, or typically act, as the descriptions whose semantic values are shared by names. Two views to start:

Famous Deeds Descriptivism: the definite description associated with a name contains information about the best known exploits of actual referent of the name.

Metalinguistic Descriptivism: the definite description associated with a name contains information about the *name* or other words used to talk about the bearer of the name.

E.g., on a metalinguistic descriptivist view,

semantic value of "Jones" = semantic value of "the person called "Jones""

semantic value of "Mark Twain" = semantic value of "the person called "Mark Twain"",

etc.

There are variants of these views, and more kinds of descriptivism besides, but the differences between them won't matter all that much for our ensuing discussion.