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REFERENCE BORROWING
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I have known Dunja Jutronic for nearly twenty years. I met her on my first visit to Croatia to attend a conference in Dubrovnik. Over the years since I have been impressed, as has everyone in the know, by her enormous contribution to the growth of analytical philosophy in Croatia and Slovenia. With her longtime friend, Nenad Mišćević, she has hatched plans for conferences and volumes, sometimes grand plans. She has then brought the plans to reality with striking charm and efficiency. And, of course, she has contributed many papers and translations. She has done me the honor of writing two of these papers on my views of reference borrowing, “Is Reference Borrowing a Causal Process?” (2006) and “Reference Borrowing and the Role of Descriptions” (2008). I have found these papers very stimulating. I am pleased to describe, in this volume in her honor, the developments that the papers forced upon me.

1. “Is Reference Borrowing a Causal Process?” (Jutronic 2006)

Kim Sterelny and I emphasize that the causal theory for names has two parts, a theory of reference *fixing* and a theory of reference *borrowing*. Reference fixing takes place initially at a dubbing in which the name is causally “grounded” in an object in virtue of that object being the object perceived in the dubbing. Witnesses to the dubbing can thereby gain the ability to designate the object with the name (1999: 66-7). And it is important to note that, typically, reference is also fixed in subsequent perceptions of the object that prompt the use of the name: the name is “multiply grounded” in the object (pp. 75-6).¹ What about reference borrowing? We state the basic idea as follows:

People not at the dubbing acquire the semantic ability from those at the dubbing. This acquisition is also a causal, indeed perceptual, process. The name is used in conversation. Hearers of the conversation, if of suitable linguistic sophistication, can gain the ability to use the name to designate the object. The exercise of that ability will designate the object in virtue of a causal chain linking the object, those at its dubbing, and the user through the conversation. (1999: 67)

Those who have borrowed reference can then lend it to others. Thus, our competence with ‘Aristotle’ is the result of centuries of reference borrowings that take us back to Aristotle’s contemporaries who grounded the name many times in the famous philosopher.

The criticisms in Jutronic’s short paper led me to add the following details to my theory (2006b).

Reference borrowing is clearly an intentional act. This is not to say that the borrower forms an intention deploying a concept of reference borrowing or deference:

¹ We think that the “*qua*-problem” poses a serious problem for this theory of reference fixing. (1999: 4.5)

that would be far too intellectualized a picture of the process. Still the borrower must process the input supplied by the situation in whatever way is appropriate for gaining, or reinforcing, an ability to use the name to designate its referent. The borrower must intentionally set in motion this particular sort of mental processing even though largely unaware of its nature and perhaps not conscious of doing so. So, reference borrowing is not just any old causal process in the communication situation: it is a special one involving that particular mental process.

It is important to note some things that are *not* required by the theory. If a person's current use of a name is to designate its bearer then that use must be caused by an ability with that name that is, *as a matter of fact*, grounded in the bearer whether via reference borrowing or directly by the person herself: *the efficacious mental state must have the right sort of causal history*. If it has the right history, that is sufficient. Contrary to what Thomas Blackburn (1988: 184) claims we need not require a borrower to recognize or acknowledge this history. And contrary to what Adele Mercier claims (1999), we need not require that a borrower's successful use of a name be accompanied by an intention to defer. The speaker intentionally exploits an ability that is, *as a matter of fact*, borrowed but the speaker need not intentionally defer to the lender. Indeed, the speaker need not know who the lender was or even that she *has* borrowed the term. There is no need for her to have any semantic thoughts about the term at all. Use of language does not require any thoughts about language.²

I have always preferred the expression 'reference borrowing' to 'deference' to capture the way in which speaker *x*'s use of a term can depend for its reference on speaker *y*'s. My reason is implicit in the above discussion. If *x* borrows the reference of a term from *y* then that is an intentional act at the time of receiving *y*'s communication. In contrast, if *x* defers to *y*'s use of a term then that is likely to be an intentional act at the time of *x*'s using the term herself to communicate. In my view, *x*'s dependence on *y* *must* involve an act of the former sort but *need not* involve one of the latter sort. A communication involving a borrowed term need not involve any intention that "looks back" to the occasion of borrowing.

Indeed, where did the idea first come from that a causal theory of reference borrowing must involve a backward-looking intention? And where did the talk of "deference" first come from? Saul Kripke follows Peter Strawson in talking of "borrowing the references" (1980: 90). He does not talk of the speaker "deferring" at the time of usage, nor mention any backward-looking intention. Rather, he says, a person in borrowing a name "must, I think, intend *when he learns it* to use it with the same reference" (p. 96, emphasis added). Yet Searle misconstrues this passage as requiring a backward-looking intention: a person who has borrowed the reference of a name must, *at the time of using it*, intend to refer to the same object as the person from who he borrowed the name (1983: 244). Donnellan does not use the terms 'deference' or 'reference borrowing'. He talks of our uses of proper names being "parasitic on uses of the names by other people." He emphasizes that "the history behind the use of a name

² This is a central theme of my book, *Ignorance of Language* (2006a).

may not be known to the individual using it” (1972: 373), implying that no backward-looking intention is required. Nor does Putnam talk of “deference” or backward-looking intentions in his introduction of the “division of linguistic labor” (1973: 705). Later, however, he does talk in ways that might be taken to suggest such intentions: “my denotation may be, by general consent, the denotation assigned by persons distant from me in space and even in time, but linked to me by relations of cooperation”; he thinks he is thus “giving up my right to be the authority on the denotation of my own words” (1975: 274). The first talk of “deferring” in this context seems to have been by Gareth Evans (1973) in the process of *criticizing* the causal theory and presenting his own.³

2. “Reference Borrowing and the Role of Descriptions” (Jutronic 2008)

My view is that a certain sort of causal connection is sufficient for reference borrowing with names. In this much longer paper, Jutronic disagrees. “Borrowers need to have some true beliefs about the referent. If so, reference borrowing involves a causal chain of communication combined with some associated description” (sec. II). Jutronic accepts the distinction between what is required at the initial time of borrowing the reference of a name and what is required at the later time of using the borrowed name. And she now accepts the causal-theory claim that the later use need not involve any intention to defer to the earlier borrowing; it need not involve any “backward-looking” intention. So she no longer endorses the criticisms of Blackburn (1988) and Mercier (1999). However, she still thinks that the causal theory of names goes too far in not requiring any descriptive element in reference borrowing. She thinks that borrowing must involve a true categorial description of the referent.

This raises a question.⁴ Jutronic clearly means, at least, that the categorial description needs to be associated with the name in the initial borrowing. But does she think that the description needs to be associated at each subsequent use as well? She does not explicitly say that it need not. And it would certainly be very hard to motivate a descriptivism that demanded the initial association but not the later one. Since Jutronic is partly inspired by the discussion of terms like ‘sloop’ and ‘dagger’ in *Language and Reality* (Devitt and Sterelny 1999: 97-8), it is worth noting that the descriptive-causal theory of reference borrowing that we tentatively propose demands both associations (although we did not make this explicit because we did not have the distinction between initial borrowing and later using at the forefront of our minds). In any case, I shall take Jutronic’s position as demanding both associations.

Jutronic thinks that our idea of reference borrowing for kind terms like ‘sloop’ and ‘dagger’ should be extended to names and natural kind terms. We do not. Talking of names, we claim that a person

³ Thanks to my students James Dow and Joshua Livingston for scholarly help with this paragraph.

⁴ My discussion draws heavily on Devitt 2008.

can pick up a name on a very slender basis, wrongly inferring all sorts of things about its bearer. Perhaps it names a university yet she believes it to name a person, a cat or a river. She is linked into the causal network for the name and so there seems to be no good reason to deny that she uses the name to designate the university.... borrowers do not have to associate the correct categorial term (1999: 79).

Why does Jutronic think otherwise? First of all she raises a question: “Why assume that we can borrow reference for ‘Blanka’ even when we are in a massive ignorance and error state and we cannot do this for ‘sloop’?” This is a good question and I shall return to it.

Jutronic goes on: “How would communication be possible if we were in ignorance and error to such great degree?” (sec. IV) In thinking about this, we need to distinguish what is required for reference with what is typical in communication. These are *very* different matters. Our claim is that people can refer to the famous Croatian high jumper using the name ‘Blanka’ despite being largely ignorant and wrong about her. The claim is *not* that most claims using ‘Blanka’ or any other name are false. Doubtless if most communications with names were false, people would lose interest in receiving these communications. But it does not follow that if most people were ignorant or wrong about named objects they would lose this interest. For, surely, most communications with names are *not* false. So those who are ignorant and wrong have a very real interest in receiving these communications: it’s a way to learn!

So I see no force in Jutronic’s point about communication. But what about her good question: Why treat ‘Blanka’ differently from ‘sloop’?

In *Language and Reality* it may seem as if our claims about the likes of ‘Blanka’ and ‘sloop’ must rest simply on intuitions about reference in situations of ignorance and error. Yet there is a way of testing these claims that does not rest on such referential intuitions. We could conduct experiments by applying the methodology argued for in *Coming to Our Senses* (1996: ch. 2; also 1994).

Here is a brief summary of that methodology. It is natural and appropriate to think that the basic task in semantics is to explain the *meanings* of thoughts and utterances. But this talk of meanings is sadly vague, as many have noted: it is far from clear what counts as a meaning that needs explaining.⁵ We need to be much more precise in identifying the subject matter of semantics. In my view, we should identify the meaning of a thought or utterance with a certain property of the thought or utterance that is crucial to its causal role.⁶ Of particular interest here are the roles of thoughts and utterances in causing

⁵ “The chief problem about semantics comes at the beginning. What is the theory of meaning a theory of?” (Higginbotham 1991: 271). “Meaning is notoriously vague” (Block 1986: 615). Lycan has brought out the problem wittily with his “Double Indexical Theory of Meaning”: “MEANING =_{def} Whatever aspect of linguistic activity happens to interest *me now*” (Lycan 1984: 272).

⁶ Paul Horwich has a similar idea (1998: 6).

intentional behavior and informing us about the world. So let us take meanings to be the properties of thoughts and utterances in virtue of which they play those causal roles. How then are we to investigate the nature of these meanings? We look to ordinary opaque attitude ascriptions. Day in and day out, folk, and social scientists, uses “content clauses,” usually ‘that’ clauses, to ascribe properties to thoughts and utterances for the very purpose of explaining behavior and learning about the world. In thus applying their “folk psychology,” they are, in effect, trying to identify the meanings that play the causal roles. Now if the folk and scientists are right in their ascriptions, then what they are ascribing are meanings. And we have good reason to believe that the folk and social scientists are mostly right because their ascriptions are mostly *successful*: they really do explain behavior and guide us to the world. The center of the theorist’s task of explaining meanings then becomes the discovery of what is common and peculiar to the thoughts and utterances that are ascribed the *same* meaning by a content clause. And the main conclusion I came to in the book is that what is common and peculiar to the meaning we ascribe to a word is a property *of referring to something in a certain way; a mode of reference*.

We can now apply this methodology to test whether a person who is competent with a name ‘*a*’ or a kind term ‘*F*’ must associate any description we like to choose with the term. So we can test any description theory of the term. And, more to the point, we can test whether someone assumed to have borrowed the term must associate a categorial term with it.

These tests start by gathering some subjects who are sufficiently expert about *a* or *F*s for there to be no doubt that they are competent with the relevant term: if anyone participates in the convention that relates the term to its referent, these subjects do. For example, if ‘*a*’ were ‘Blanka’, the subjects would be knowledgeable about the career of the high jumper, knowing that she won at the World Championship in Osaka, and so on; and if ‘*F*’ were ‘sloop’, the subjects would be knowledgeable about sail boats, knowing that a sloop is a boat having a single mast with a mainsail and jib. If necessary, the subjects can be supplied with some of this information. Then the subjects are told some stories, each involving a different character. In these stories the characters use ‘*a*’ or ‘*F*’ several times to make statements ask questions, and so on. The stories reveal that these characters vary greatly in their knowledge of *a* or *F*s one being knowledgeable, one being largely ignorant and wrong, and others being in between. Then, the experiment seeks to discover what thoughts and utterances the subjects attribute to these characters using ‘*a*’ or ‘*F*’ in content clauses. Do subjects assert that a character believes that...*a*..., said that...*F*..., wonders whether ...*a*..., and so on? The experiment might simply ask the subjects their opinions on these matters. However it would be better to try to elicit the opinions by asking the subjects to say how they explain the behaviour of the characters and what, if anything, they have learnt from the characters.⁷ These attributions by the subjects are significant because we theorists can then reason as follows. If the subjects are right in the contents they ascribe, then those contents will all be *about a or Fs*: the attributions won’t

⁷ The model here is “the technique of elicited production” that some psycholinguists have used so effectively on children; see Crain *et al* 2005, section 4, for a nice summary.

be right unless the thoughts and utterances of the characters co-refer with the subjects' 'a' or 'F' and the subjects' 'a' refers to *a* or their 'F' refers to *F*s. And we have good reason to suppose that the subjects will mostly be right in their attributions: first, we can expect the subjects to be, like the rest of us, *generally* successful in ascribing contents to explain behavior and gain information about the world; second, given their indubitable competence with 'a' or 'F', there is no reason to suppose that this general success will not be exemplified in this particular context. And note that, although these attributions reflect folk psychology, they do not deploy any semantic concepts like REFERENCE and so do not draw on a folk semantics in which we should not put a great deal of trust.

So we have very good reason to believe that any thought or utterance of a character that the subjects describe using 'that...a...' *refers to a* and describe using 'that...F...' *refers to F*s. So we can look to what is common and peculiar to these thoughts and utterances to discover what is required for referring successfully with 'a' or 'F'. The anti-descriptivist predicts that a character need not associate true descriptions of *a* or *F*s: ignorance and error should make no difference to the readiness of the subjects to ascribe thoughts and utterances about *a* or *F*s to characters.

Where our particular concern is to test whether reference borrowers must associate categorial terms, it should be clear from the stories that all the characters' uses of 'a' or 'F' arise from the communications of others and not from any direct acquaintance with *a* or *F*s. And the ignorant character would make utterances indicating that she does not associate the right categorial term with 'a' or 'F'; for example, "I think Blanka is a town in Croatia?" and "Aren't sloops some kind of cutting instrument?" My view of names predicts that subjects will be as ready to ascribe Blanka-thoughts to the ignorant character as to the knowledgeable. So they will be prepared to say that the ignorant character believes that Blanka is a town. Jutronic has the opposite prediction. My tentative proposal about 'sloop', in contrast, predicts that subjects will not be as ready to ascribe sloop-thoughts to the ignorant. So they will be reluctant to say that the ignorant character wonders whether sloops are cutting instruments. Jutronic shares this prediction.

I confess to being far from confident which predictions would be confirmed.

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