Interpreting proper names
Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2022

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1 Interpretation

The interpretation function is $[\ ]$. It is our bridge from language to the world. We hope it captures the conventional aspects of meaning.

2 Kripke’s (1980) direct-reference theory of proper names

Proper names refer directly to the entities they pick out:

$[\text{Bart}] = \boxed{\text{Bart}}$
$[\text{Burns}] = \boxed{\text{Burns}}$

i. **Dubbing**: There is an initial “dubbing”, in which the entity is named.

ii. **Convention**: From then on, it is a convention of the language (and the society), that that name picks out that particular entity.

iii. **A historical network of users**: Speaker $S_n$ acquires the name from speaker $S_{n-1}$, who acquires it from $S_{n-2}$, and so forth, all the way back to people who were present at the “dubbing”.

iv. **Intentions**: If I am not part of such a historical network but I use the name anyway, then I do so with the intention to refer to the same entity that speakers in the network intend to refer to.

For additional discussion, see our optional reading Devitt & Sterelny 1987:§3–4.

3 Notes

i. Many different events can count as “dubbing” events: signing a birth certificate, changing one’s name, participating in a religious ceremony, declaring out loud that one has changed one’s name, and so forth.

ii. Who has the right to create these conventions? This is a complex sociolinguistic question. Who gets to give you a nickname?

iii. It is easy to explain why statements like “Everest is Sagarmāthā” are informative: they explain that two causal networks share the same final referent.

iv. It is easy to characterize mistaken uses of names on this theory: you use a name with the intention of engaging a particular historical network of users, and the final referent in that network is not the entity you think it is.
4 Proper names and definite descriptions: A comparison

Some confusion about authorship  It happens that

(1) $[\text{The author of Syntactic Structures}] = \text{J}$

(2) $[\text{Noam Chomsky}] = \text{K}$

Suppose we learned that Chomsky did not in fact write *Syntactic Structures*. Suppose it was written by Kurt Vonnegut. What would happen to our intuitions about the values in (1) and (2)?

5 Mistakes and intentions

Suppose I falsely believe (3) but intend to use “Noam Chomsky” the way others do.

(3) $[\text{Noam Chomsky}] = \text{K}$

What truth values does the direct-reference theory assign to my utterances (4) and (5)?

(4) “Noam Chomsky wrote *Syntactic Structures*.”

(5) “Noam Chomsky wrote *Slaughterhouse-Five*.”

References
