

Interpreting proper names

Chris Potts, Ling 130a/230a: Introduction to semantics and pragmatics, Winter 2024


Jan 11

1 Interpretation

The interpretation function is $\llbracket \ \rrbracket$. 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:

$$\llbracket \text{Bart} \rrbracket = \text{

- 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) $\llbracket \textit{The author of Syntactic Structures} \rrbracket =$



(2) $\llbracket \textit{Noam Chomsky} \rrbracket =$



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) $\llbracket \textit{Noam Chomsky} \rrbracket =$



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

Devitt, Michael & Kim Sterelny. 1987. *Language and reality: An introduction to the philosophy of language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Kripke, Saul. 1980. *Naming and necessity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.