

## Empty names

### 1 Introduction

Suppose one believes that one can get close to specifying what knowledge is involved in understanding a sentence in terms of knowledge of what it would be for the sentence to be true. What would be the corresponding thing to say about what knowledge is involved in understanding a referring expression, say a name? One possible answer is that it is to know what it would be for the name to refer. This is not knowledge of what the name refers to, but rather knowledge of conditions under which it would refer, knowledge, that is, of how something would have to be in order to be what the name refers to. In short, if the meaning of a sentence is its truth condition, a cognate thought is that the meaning of a name is its reference condition.

Natural as this might appear, it has featured only rather rarely in the development of truth conditional semantics. More often, it is supposed that a semantic axiom for a name will specify its bearer; the analogue for this at the level of sentences would be the absurd idea that a semantic axiom for a sentence would specify its truth value, and that understanding a sentence would involve identifying this value. Current semantic orthodoxy relates sentences to truth conditions rather than truth values, but names to bearers rather than to reference conditions. The main aim of this paper is to restore the analogy by arguing for a reference-conditions approach to names. This makes the project of truth conditional semantics no more difficult, and it brings the immediate benefit of enabling such a semantics to describe the use of empty names.

### 2 Defending reference-conditions

#### 2.1 *Burge's proposal*

Standard truth theories use axioms for names based on the following idea:

The reference of "Hesperus" = Hesperus.

Since, in the usual versions of such theories, the metalanguage does not contain primitive function symbols or a referential description operator, a formalized version would look more like:

$$(1) \quad \exists x (\text{“Hesperus” refers to } x \text{ and } \forall y (\text{“Hesperus” refers to } y \supset x=y) \text{ and } x = \text{Hesperus}).$$

I call such axioms “bearer-specifying” because they affirm that the name has a bearer and go on to identify it. By contrast, a reference condition axiom of the kind proposed by Burge has the form:

$$(2) \quad \forall x (\text{“Hesperus” refers to } x \text{ iff } x = \text{Hesperus}).$$

Here there is no explicit assertion that the name refers to anything. However, classically, that something is Hesperus can be derived from (2) by Existential Generalization, thus in effect transforming it into (1). Indeed, in classical logic, the mere classification of some expression “*a*” as a name ensures that we have for it a theorem of the form

$$(3) \quad \exists x x = a,$$

which in turn ensures that, if the theorems of the language of classical logic are true, that language contains no empty names. Since Burge’s proposal is motivated largely by a desire to make room for intelligible empty names, he naturally sets it in a non-classical, “free”, logic. The main features are that although the truth of an atomic sentence requires the singular terms in it to have referents, unrestricted Existential Generalization is not admitted. (3) is not a theorem, and the inference from (2) to the existential generalization which seemed to show that the axiom was committed to something being Hesperus is not valid. Likewise, Universal Instantiation is restricted (we would not want a valid inference from “Everything exists” to “Pegasus exists”); and although we have a quantified form of the axiom of identity ( $\forall x x=x$ ) we do not have, for every name, *a*, a theorem of the form  $a = a$ ; if we did, we would violate the principle that true atoms have non-empty singular terms.<sup>1</sup>

One might argue for the merits of free logic on grounds independent of the intelligibility of empty names. For example, if one accepts a standard account of validity, according to which a valid argument is one such that, for each world at which the premises are true, so is the conclusion, one

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<sup>1</sup>The free logic in question is termed “negative free logic” by Lambert (1982). Indeed, it is so-called “inclusive” negative free logic, since the empty domain is allowed.

will reject the classical rule of universal instantiation, since, even though “Socrates” is (in fact) not empty, there are worlds at which “Everything is perishable” is true but “Socrates is perishable” is not (worlds at which Socrates does not exist).<sup>2</sup> Rejecting the classical rule of instantiation is at least a step towards a free logic.

## 2.2 *Arguments for the intelligibility of empty names*

The intelligibility of at least some empty names is supported by giving examples of how easily they can be introduced, whether as fiction, jest or through error; stressing that various actual empty names have distinct understanding conditions (e.g. “Vulcan” and “Santa Claus”), and so have understanding conditions, and so have meaning; and reflecting on what is to be expected of a semantic theorist. I shall stress some considerations derived from a consideration of the goals and methods of semantic theory.<sup>3</sup>

A semantic theorist, as radical interpreter, must immerse himself in the language-using practices of his subjects. He cannot expect to be able to translate all their words into his own language. He must expect to enrich his own language with terms, especially names, from the language he is studying. Vague as the notion of immersion may be, it is natural to suppose that some degree of it is sufficient for understanding. In that case, nothing else is necessary. So unless immersion in a practice covertly requires the existence of a referent if the practice involves a name, the possibility of understanding empty names follows from the data of interpretation.

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<sup>2</sup>The argument is due to Yannis Stephanou. The case is only *prima facie*. Classical instantiation could be defended in a number of ways, including claiming that quantifiers are associated (possibly in inexplicit but contextually determined ways) with domains and that a proper account of validity requires that quantifier domains be held constant.

<sup>3</sup>These considerations all have a *prima facie* character, for if there is a direct and decisive argument for the claim that a name must name, then this conclusion must somehow be accommodated in the methodology of semantic theorizing. Hence the arguments against arguments for the view that every intelligible name must have a bearer are complementary to those offered here: see Sainsbury (1999).

Everyone can agree that there is a difference between a systematic and normative practice involving a name with a bearer and what seems to be such a practice involving an empty name. The dispute is whether the difference should be noted by the semantic theorist. The answer should turn on whether similar kinds of generalization and explanation are available in both cases; in particular whether there is a genuinely non-disjunctive conception of a name-using practice, one which has serious theoretical value and which embraces empty and non-empty names. We can explain why many adults are excited by the thought of a trip to *Paris* in terms of their expectations that Paris is beautiful and has excellent restaurants, where the evidence for the relevant beliefs derives in part from their utterances. In just the same way, we can explain why children are excited at Christmas in terms of their expectations that *Santa* will bring them presents, where the evidence for the relevant beliefs derives in part from their utterances.

The unifying conception of name-using practices turns on the notion of a source, which will be an object, the bearer of the name, in the non-empty case, but something else (a rumour, speculation or mistake) in the empty case.

In both cases, some induction into the practice required, and there are vague standards of whether a neophyte has achieved mastery. Just as someone who sincerely utters “Aristotle was an Icelandic poet” is likely not to have mastered “Aristotle” as used of the philosopher, so someone who sincerely utters “Santa Claus is the planet postulated by Le Verrier to explain the orbit of Mercury” is likely not to have mastered “Santa Claus” as used in connection with Christmas. In both cases the evidence is defeasible: both cases are subject to a delicate distinction between failure of mastery and weird belief. It would be a mistake to suppose that this distinction can only be made in terms of whether the beliefs originated in a relevant object. Where two objects are in fact involved in the use of what is supposed to be a single unambiguous name, we have the problem of saying whether the users have beliefs about just one or both or neither. This opens the possibility that the material needed to resolve such problems for non-empty names will be enough to make the relevant distinctions for empty ones.

Cases in which the population under study is agnostic about, for example, whether there ever was such a person as Homer, or which is divided on the issue, are particularly striking. The bearer-specifying theorist would need to resolve the issue. From his perspective, if “Homer” is empty, semantic theory has nothing to say about it; the activities relating to this vocable do not constitute a name-using practice, and ordinary sentences containing it lack truth conditions. Yet it seems clear that semantic theory should be able to describe the relevant behaviour without risking falsification by the eventual discovery that the sceptics were right and there really is no such person as Homer.

We could not expect a semantic theorist to explore the historical origin of every name on the University’s register to see if it is genuine or is, rather, like “Paul R. Zwier” (Larson and Segal 1995, p.161); nor need he be an astronomer, which he would have to be to distinguish “Neptune” and “Vulcan”; nor a theologian, which he would have to be to determine which, if any, of his subjects’ names for gods are empty; nor a chemist, which he would have to be to distinguish “phlogiston” and “ether” from “heat” and “air”; nor a literary theorist with sound views on the authorship of *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. To suppose otherwise is not merely implausible but potentially incoherent, for the relevant investigations would take for granted that the names are intelligible, and would be guided by what that meaning is. This would underwrite the possibility of intelligible questions *whether* there is such a person as Paul R. Zwier, *where* Vulcan is supposed to be, if it exists, *what* phlogiston is meant to be like, and *who* Homer was, if anyone. The questions to be investigated make essential use of, and thus presuppose the intelligibility of, the names in question. Semantic theory is one thing, specialist knowledge of non-semantic fact another.

A preference for a reference-condition over a bearer-specifying theory can be motivated even for non-empty names. It would seem possible that the users of such a name, say “*a*”, which in fact refers to *a*, should fail to know that *a* exists, even if they have true beliefs to this effect. The failure of knowledge might derive from a deviant link in some causal chain, or from a serious lack of confidence (one can select an explanation to fit one’s theory of knowledge). A semantic theorist of the bearer-specifying kind, however, is required to make an explicit affirmation of the existence of *a*. Since the theorist should affirm only what he knows, he is required to have knowledge that

outstrips that of the speakers whose knowledge he is trying to describe. Moreover, in attributing to the speakers implicit knowledge of the semantic theory, he is attributing to them knowledge which, by hypothesis, they lack. No such contradiction besets the reference-condition theories.

One can view a semantic axiom as if it were a stipulation governing the use of an expression. One cannot stipulate things into existence, so nothing of the form of (1) could count as an axiom of semantic theory. By contrast, one can stipulate an “at most one” condition, as (2) in effect does, understood within free logic. For one can stipulate that a tie for victory is defeat: if there is a group containing more than one candidate for meeting an “at most” condition, like that of being Hesperus, and each candidate in this group is as good as any other in the group but is a better candidate than any of the candidates outside the group, then no candidate counts as meeting the condition.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. A problem resolved

One who agrees that reference-condition semantics are not descriptivist<sup>5</sup> may counter that this leaves no room for the possibility of understanding an empty name. Such a name would introduce

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<sup>4</sup>In fact, there is a double necessitation in the stipulation, for every theorist must recognize the phenomenon characterised by Kripke (1972) as rigid designation. In terms of the reference-condition theorist, for a rigid designator anything which in fact meets the reference condition must do so. This is not ensured by the stipulation, mentioned in the text, that, necessarily, at most one thing meets the condition.

One can stipulate that the most senior lady is to sit on *the host's right*; this is not to stipulate someone into existence. Could one not likewise stipulate that Hesperus is to be *the reference of "Hesperus"* ? If so, one possible inference is that definite descriptions should not be regarded as explicit affirmations of existence, as in (2). Accepting this would not undermine the main thrust of this paper, for non-Russellian treatments of definite descriptions may well be sympathetic to a free logical system of the kind here endorsed.

<sup>5</sup>I use the term “reference-conditions semantic theory” as a way of describing a semantic theory using axioms modelled on (2). However, it must be admitted that description theories of names also give conditions for reference. Here I assume without argument that such theories are unsatisfactory.

an individual concept which is non-descriptive yet true of nothing. But what is there, other than the world or a description of it? If a name is associated with the former, then we have the bearer-specifying or Russellian view, and the reference condition theorist has disowned the latter; so there is no ground on which to stand.

Let us use “individual concept” to express, roughly, the sense or meaning of a proper name. An individual concept, empty or otherwise, should be “individuating”. At a minimum, this means that at most one thing should answer to it. More strongly, there are various notions of rigidity, having in common, roughly, that the “at most one” condition obtains across worlds. In coming to see how this should apply to empty individual concepts, we can also see how there is a logical space between a descriptive account and a bearer-specifying one.

The question what, at some non-actual world, answers to an individual concept which in fact has a bearer, *b*, seems to be made determinate in virtue of amounting to the question which thing if any, at this non-actual world, is *b*? It seems that we cannot in exactly the same way underpin the determinateness of the question for an individual concept which does not in fact have a bearer. This may encourage the suspicion that one cannot really make sense of empty individual concepts. However, there is a way of pressing the analogy. Underlying the original idea for non-empty individual concepts is that their bearer at an alternative world is fixed by what their bearer is at the actual world: it is that very object, if it exists. The natural application to empty individual concepts, ones which have no bearer at the actual world, is that this should fix what they refer to at

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Suppose the kind of haecceities invoked by the reference-condition theory I envisage turned out to be reducible to qualitative properties. Should one conclude that there is no difference between a reference-condition theory of the kind I am promoting and a descriptive theory? The conclusion does not follow. I see a semantic theory as designed to state things which if known by speakers would explain their behaviour. But one might know something of the form “this has property F” without knowing anything of the form “this has property G” even if the property F is the property G. Thanks to David Sosa for discussion of this issue.

alternative worlds, viz. nothing. This is one natural extension of rigidity, and would hold if, for example, we stipulate that a term *t* is rigid only if, holding constant the meaning of *t*,

for all *x*, if there is a world at which *t* refers to *x*, then *t* refers to *x* at the actual world.

Terence Parsons has presented an argument which is consonant with this proposal:

The individual concept expressed in the story [*The Lord of the Flies*] by the name “Piggy” should present a unique individual, presumably the one who did the things that Piggy did in the story. But what about states of affairs in which the events described in the story took place twice, on two different islands, with two different sets of people involved? Which individual will the individual concept then pick out? It cannot pick out both, for individual concepts must present at most one individual. The only solution I can think of here is to suppose that in such a possible state of affairs the individual concept picks out nothing at all. (1982, p. 85)

I think that Parsons’s reasoning is sound: if we allow that some possible object satisfies an empty individual concept on the strength of the object’s possessing supposedly characteristic qualitative features, we cannot reasonably resist allowing that a distinct possible object should also do so; but this is inconsistent with the supposed individuating character of an individual concept. We should accordingly say that a name or concept which is in fact empty is necessarily so (relative to the constancy of its meaning), and in this way individual concepts, empty or not, determine definite answers to questions of their transworld applicability.<sup>6</sup>

What remains is to account for the apparent plausibility of the idea that, for example, there might have been such a planet as Vulcan, or that *The Lord of the Flies* might have been a true story rather than just a fiction. For it seems that these possibilities require there to be worlds at which actually empty names, retaining their actual meaning, are not empty.

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<sup>6</sup>This harmonizes with Dummett’s view: “we need to take the semantic role of an empty name to consist in its having no bearer” (1983, p. 295). It remains for Dummett to explain how distinct empty names can have distinct semantic roles.



Let us compare the case with perceptual demonstratives. Suppose I have a hallucinatory experience with a content I am disposed to express with the words “That elephant is pink”. There is a clear sense in which, though I was in fact hallucinating, I might have had a similar but non-hallucinatory experience. To realize this possibility, all that is needed, however, is that I might have experienced *an* elephant. There is no question of trying to connect with the “that elephant” of my hallucination, in an attempt to say that *it* might have been real. The relevant alternative possibility is general and qualitative rather than singular, and thus one which might be realized by more than one individual.<sup>7</sup> The possibility is not that “That elephant is pink”, with the content it has as actually uttered, should have been true, but that it might have been that these words should have been truly uttered under perceptually similar circumstances.

Le Verrier was more fortunate in his speculations about Neptune than in those about Vulcan. In the former case, he speculated that some hitherto unobserved planet was disturbing the course of Uranus. He was right (though the planet was some way from the position he had indicated), and the planet later came to be called Neptune. When he made a similar speculation to explain the orbit of Mercury, he was wrong, so the name “Vulcan”, introduced for the supposed unseen planet, was in fact empty. But might not the solar system have been differently disposed? In that case would it not be right to say that Vulcan, the very planet which does not in fact exist, would have existed?

As in the perceptual case, it makes doubtful sense to say this last thing, for it is unclear what we are saying would have existed; and there is no need to say it. What we want to acknowledge is that there is a qualitative possibility in which what Le Verrier did was a good contribution to astronomy, rather than a failed speculation. For this to be so, it is not necessary that this possibility should be describable using the word “Vulcan” (with its actual content). The story might have gone: he noted the disturbance in Mercury’s orbit, posited *a* planet to account for it, called it Vulcan, and, yes, a more powerful telescope revealed that there was indeed such a planet. The

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<sup>7</sup>Thanks to Michael Martin for suggesting this analogy.

possibility is not that utterances like “Vulcan is a planet”, with the content they have as actually uttered, should have been true, but that it might have been that these words should have been truly uttered under observationally similar circumstances. This possibility is realizable by more than one individual. It is consistent with the story that “Vulcan” have a meaning it does not actually have, though the alternative meaning would need to be related to the actual meaning: the actual “Vulcan”-using practice is in some ways similar to the practice that would have existed if our supposition had been actual.

We can use this idea to explain how distinct empty names can be associated with distinct individual concepts, even though there is no distinction at the level of reference. Which alternatives to the actual world would be ones in which there is a similar name-using practice, in which a syntactic replica of an actually empty name is non-empty, will vary from one empty name to another. For “Vulcan” the relevant alternatives will include ones with a different arrangement of planets, but other things can be much the same; for “Santa Claus” the relevant alternatives will include ones with a different arrangement of bearded men and reindeer in Lapland, but the solar system can be much the same. Our grasp of the meaning of many empty names is thus partially constituted by a grasp of its location in a range of possible similar non-empty names: syntactic duplicates, having bearers, and used in similar practices.

Much else remains to be done in order to provide a full justification for the reference condition view. In particular, it turns out that various kinds of difficulty in individuating name-using practices for non-empty names are mirrored in difficulties in individuating name-using practices for empty names, and this is highly suggestive of an underlying unity. But these are matters for another occasion.<sup>8</sup>

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