

FAILED REFERENCE AND FEIGNED REFERENCE:
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

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Because there are no nonexistent objects, I will say nothing about them. I can at least try to explain why nothing can be said (or thought) about them. On a more positive note, I will also try to explain what is involved in referring, or at least purporting to refer, to nonexistent objects. There are two cases to consider here, unsuccessful reference and fictional reference. I will take a pragmatic approach to both. I will argue that unsuccessful reference raises no special problems. Failure to refer both by expressions and by speakers in using them can be handled unproblematically within the context of the theory of speech acts and communication.

As for fiction, I will take the position that there is nothing special semantically, as to either meaning or reference, about the language of fictional discourse. Fictional discourse is a distinctive use of ordinary language. A storyteller is not performing ordinary acts of communication but is pretending to communicate. He is not referring to anyone or anything but is merely pretending to. I take this to be a truism, but some philosophers have suggested that discourse *about* fiction is also a case of pretense or make-believe. I will argue that such discourse is normal communication and involves ordinary speech acts, albeit of a special kind. There is nothing make-believe about our discourse about fiction — it is the fiction that is make-believe. We discuss fiction for the reality that it is: fictional discourse. Our discourse about fiction is discourse about discourse — it is implicitly indirect discourse. When we describe the world of a fiction, we are stating what the fiction says (or implies). And when we refer to a fictional character, we are doing so in the context of stating what the fiction says or implies about that character.

Thinking about Nonexistent Objects

Long ago, Russell warned against those theories, such as Meinong's, in which "there is a failure of that feeling for reality which ought to be preserved even in the most abstract studies [i.e. logic]" (1919, 169). As far as Russell was concerned,

To say that unicorns have an existence in heraldry, or in literature, or in imagination, is a most pitiful and paltry evasion. ... Similarly, to maintain that Hamlet, for example, existed in ... the world of Shakespeare's imagination, just as truly as (say) Napoleon existed in the ordinary world, is to say something deliberately confusing, or else confused to a degree which is scarcely credible. There is only one world, the "real" world. (*Ibid.*)

Guided by Russell, I cannot subscribe to the Meinongianism of Terence Parsons (1980) or the "extreme modal realism" of David Lewis, "according to which there are many unactualized possible individuals, and according to which the actual individuals do not differ in kind from the unactualized ones" (1983, *xi*). I have no problem with possible worlds talk, so long as it is qualified by disclaimers like Saul Kripke's (1980, 15-20), who recognizes, for example, the "spurious problems of 'transworld identification' "; and rejects avoiding these problems by means of approaches like Lewis's "counterpart theory".

At any rate, my topic is not nonexistent objects but reference to them. In my view the act of referring to an object, part of an act of communication, is the act of expressing a thought about it. Accordingly, the theory of singular reference depends on the theory of singular thought. I have developed such a theory (Bach 1979, 1986), according to which a thought about an object can be either descriptive (*de dicto*) or *de re*. In a descriptive thought, the object is thought of under an individual concept, expressible by a definite description, and its content is not a singular but a general, uniqueness proposition of the sort given by Russell's theory of descriptions. Its object is determined *satisfactionally*, as the individual (if any) which uniquely satisfies the description in question. If you think that the tallest man in the world is more than eight feet tall, the object of your thought is whoever happens to be the tallest man in the world. On the other hand, if you think that the moon of Venus is round, your thought has no object, since Venus has no moon.

De re thoughts, in my view, can be based directly on perception or indirectly on memory or on communication by others. The content of a *de re* thought is not a proposition, general or singular, for its object is thought of under what I call a “*de re* mode or presentation”, a kind of “mental indexical”. This can be a percept, a memory, or a name. In each case the object of thought is determined not satisfactorily but *relationally*. It is the individual (if any) which stands in the appropriate causal relation, as determined by the relevant mode of presentation, to the thought token in question. I define *de re* relations recursively, beginning with the perceptual case. The idea here is that the object of a *de re* thought must be either something one is currently perceiving, something one has perceived before, or the object of someone else’s *de re* thought.¹ Without going into details, suffice it to say that on my relational theory, the possibility of a *de re* thought does not depend on the existence of its object. However, since only real objects can stand in causal relations, *de re* thoughts cannot have nonexistent objects. (Some do not have *any* objects.)

Now I can explain — and qualify — my opening remark that nothing can be thought about nonexistent objects (reference to them will be taken up later). We *can* have descriptive thoughts about them, but only in a weak sense, because the contents of such thoughts are general propositions. You can think that the moon of Venus is round, or that the moon of Venus might have existed, only because such thoughts are not really singular. There is nothing in particular, no *specific* unactualized individual, that would have to exist for such a thought to be true. Now assume (contrary to what I believe possible) that “Pegasus” is the name of a specific unactualized individual and expresses a *de re* mode of presentation of that individual, and consider the thought that Pegasus flies or, more to the point, the thought that Pegasus might have existed. On this assumption there could only be one possible flying horse which would have to exist for such thoughts to be true. But (insofar as it even makes sense to ask) which possible flying horse in particular would this have to be? Why one rather than another? What could make it the case that one such

1. In the last case, where one has heard about the object from someone else, either he is perceiving it, he has perceived it, or it is the object of the *de re* thought of someone else again, from whom he has heard about it.

horse rather than another one qualitatively just like it is *Pegasus*? Clearly there is no way to answer these (rhetorical) questions. It simply makes no sense to say that a certain particular that does not (and never did) exist might have existed. At most we can say that a particular of a certain sort might have existed. There is no way that the name “Pegasus” could get attached to one possible flying horse rather than another.² There is no such thing as the representation, linguistic or mental, of the particularity of an individual (see Bach 1983), existent or nonexistent. What makes a singular thought, if it is not descriptive, about a certain object in particular, is the causal relation that object bears to that very thought. And only something real can bear that relation.

I can express my skepticism about unactualized possibilities differently³ by considering Peter Geach’s (1967, 628) famous, puzzling sentence,

Hob thinks a witch has blighted Bob’s mare, and Nob wonders whether she (the same witch) killed Cob’s sow.

To get at the interpretation Geach was interested in, we exclude the case in which there are witches as well as the case in which Nob thinks of the object of his wonder under the description “the witch Hob thinks has blighted Bob’s mare”. Both of those cases are unproblematic anyway. In the problematic case, it is supposed that there are no witches, that Hob thinks that a certain (nonexistent) witch has blighted Bob’s mare, and that Nob wonders whether a certain witch (but not under the description “the witch Hob thinks has blighted Bob’s mare”) killed Cob’s sow. In this case, I maintain, it does not even make sense to speak of Nob as wondering whether the same witch killed Cob’s sow. It may seem to make sense but after all, before Einstein came along it seemed to make sense to speak of two events as being absolutely simultaneous. The fact is that nothing

2. A more metaphysically loaded way of putting my point is to say that there are no unrealized individual essences. There is no such thing as the particularity (or “haecceity”) of a nonexistent object. I am not even sure what it means to speak, as some philosophers do, of the particularity of an *existent* object.

3. Another reason for my skepticism is that positing unactualized possibilities commits one to indeterminate objects, which I, unlike Parsons (1980), find most unpalatable.

can count as the object of Nob's wonder being or even seeming to be the same as the object of Hob's belief.

Two Types of Speaker Reference: Objectual and Descriptive

Before stating my views on reference failure and on fictional reference, I should present some background on normal reference.⁴ First of all, it is necessary to distinguish linguistic reference from speaker reference, since we say both that expressions refer (denote) and that speakers use them to refer. This distinction is required in order to account for the fact that referring expressions are not always used to refer, as in belief and existence contexts, and that a speaker can use an expression to refer to something to which the expression itself does not refer, as when the expression is used nonliterally. In this section and in the next two, on reference failure and fictional reference respectively, the discussion will be limited to speaker reference. The implications of reference failure and fictional reference on referring expressions themselves will be taken up in the final section.

My approach to speaker reference can best be explained in the context of the general theory of speech acts presented in Bach and Harnish (1979). We hold that sentences are customarily used to perform acts of communication, which constitute the main kind of illocutionary acts.⁵ To perform an act of communication is, in a certain specific sense, to express an attitude, which we define as uttering a sentence with the intention for the hearer to take one's utterance as reason to think one has that attitude.⁶ Successful communication of that attitude to the hearer does not require that he adopt it (or, for that matter, form some correlative attitude, such as, in the case of expressing a desire, intending to do what the speaker

4. For reasons of space, I will not be able to spell out or defend my theory of reference and from time to time I will have to refer the reader elsewhere for details. My general theory will be found in Bach (forthcoming).

5. There are also conventional illocutionary acts, such as christening and appointing (see Bach and Harnish 1979, chapter 5), but conventional acts are not relevant here.

6. We call such intentions reflexive or R-intentions. In this paper I will omit the 'R-' and for convenience just use 'intention' to mean R-intention, the sort of intention essential to communication.

wants him to do); it is enough for the hearer to identify which attitude the speaker is expressing. For example, if the speaker is making a statement, perlocutionary success requires being believed and if he is making a request it requires being complied with, but *communicative* (illocutionary) success requires merely being understood. As Harnish and I like to characterize such communicative intentions, “their fulfillment consists in their recognition” (*ibid.*, 15).

Since referring to something is always part and parcel of performing an illocutionary act and in turn is performed with a communicative intention, a referential intention (if the speaker has one) is simply a component of a communicative intention. To refer to something is simply to express an attitude about it, provided that one is using some specific expression in one’s utterance to indicate the object of that attitude; alluding to an object without mentioning it is not referring to that object.

Now a communicative act is successful just in case one’s audience identifies the attitude one is expressing. So if the attitude is about a certain individual and one is using a singular term to indicate its object, the act of reference is successful only if the audience identifies the object of that attitude. However, this cannot be done any which way, insofar as it is not enough that the audience identify the correct object. Since identifying the object is part of identifying the attitude being expressed, successful reference requires that the audience identify the object of the attitude being expressed in accordance with how the speaker intends him to identify the attitude as a whole.

Here is where the distinction between *descriptive* and *objectual* reference comes in. A speaker is referring descriptively if he intends to be talking about whatever uniquely satisfies a certain individual concept, which he may or may not be using a definite description to express but which the hearer is to recognize as determining the referent. He is referring objectually if what is relevant to his referential intention is not how the hearer identifies the referent but only that he identify the object the speaker has in mind and intends to be talking about.⁷ Now with descriptive reference nothing counts as

7. If the distinction between objectual and descriptive reference sounds familiar, that is because it is in effect a generalization of Donnellan’s (1966) distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions.

getting the referent right or wrong beyond recognizing the individual concept that is intended to determine the referent. Indeed, in this case the speaker's act of referring is communicatively successful just in case his audience identifies the description under which he is attempting to refer. For this it is not required that the description actually be satisfied although, of course, full referential success does require that there actually be a referent. On the other hand, for objectual reference to be successful, even communicatively, there must actually be an object to which the speaker is referring. Otherwise, there is nothing for the hearer to get right as the object of the speaker's referential intention. Nothing could count as the hearer's thinking of the same individual as the one the speaker intends him to be thinking of. The hearer may identify the mode of presentation under which the speaker seems to himself to have something in mind while attempting to refer, but that is not part of the speaker's referential intention.

Another way to explain this distinctive feature of objectual as opposed to descriptive reference is to invoke Jerry Fodor's (1980) distinction between wide and narrow attributions of psychological states. Since a referential intention is part of the communicative intention involved in an act of expressing an attitude, that act can succeed only if the audience identifies the attitude being expressed. Now since the attitude being expressed purports to be about a certain individual, the attitude can be identified either widely or narrowly. If it is identified widely, its object must be identified; if narrowly, merely its content. But if the referential intention is objectual, then the reference can succeed communicatively only if there is an object to be identified. If there is no such object, the most the audience can do is recognize *that* the speaker intends that an object of such-and-such a sort is to be identified. But this is merely to identify the expressed attitude narrowly, and it was part of the speaker's intention that it be identified widely. If the speaker's referential intention is descriptive, then the attitude he is expressing is intended to be identified narrowly. In that case, the success of the referential intention does not depend on the existence of the intended referent. For the audience can identify the expressed attitude without having to identify its object (if any).

Reference Failure

It should be clear that reference failure raises no special issues (at least for speaker reference) unless the reference purports to be objectual rather than descriptive. The reason is simple: if a speaker is merely referring descriptively, his act of reference is communicatively successful just in case his audience identifies the description under which he is attempting to refer; whereas with objectual reference, communicative success requires that the audience identify the referent itself.

Suppose that Hal is trying to refer objectually, say by name, to a friend named “Nemo”, whom you know to be delusional, and is telling you that Nemo has just come in the room. Hal is having a certain perceptual experience of his seemingly familiar friend, whom he believes to have returned (not that anything counts as this imaginary companion’s being the same as the one remembered), and takes you to be seeing Nemo too. Thus Hal is attempting to refer to Nemo in just the same way as he would to a real person. You can understand what he is trying to do, but he cannot succeed — there is no one for you to identify as Nemo.

To appreciate this point, suppose that Hal were addressing someone else along with you and you both took him to be attempting to refer to his imaginary companion Nemo. The two of you do not agree on who Hal takes Nemo to be. You might claim that Hal thinks that Nemo is a sea captain, while your friend might insist that Hal thinks that Nemo is an astronaut. However, the two of you could not agree or disagree as to who Nemo is, and could not get into a dispute about that. Neither one of you is using “Nemo” to refer to anyone, and you are both using it as short for the unsatisfied definite description, “Hal’s companion named ‘Nemo’ ”.

When we believe that a speaker is trying to refer objectually to an individual that does not exist, in which case nothing counts as identifying the referent, we can still go along, so to speak, with his act of reference, and act as if he had succeeded in referring to a certain individual. We can use the same referring expression (for example, the name “Nemo”) in conversation with him and, for that matter, to “refer” others to this imaginary individual. Of course we cannot literally refer to this individual, for we are making fictional reference, which is real reference no more than fool’s gold is real gold.

Fictional Reference

The language of fiction is perfectly ordinary language. There are no changes of meaning in the expressions used (unless such changes are part of the story). What distinguishes fictional discourse is not its language but how that language is used. It is truism that this distinctive use of language is a kind of “make-believe” (Kendall Walton 1978) and that apparent reference in fiction is really feigned reference. A storyteller is not performing ordinary acts of communication but is pretending to communicate. As David Lewis says, “Storytelling is pretence. The storyteller purports to be telling the truth about matters whereof he has knowledge” (1983, 266). He is pretending to report a series of events, to describe settings, situations, and characters, and even to quote characters. He is not performing acts of communication but is merely pretending to. He is not even purporting to express attitudes about the world or to refer to particular individuals,⁸ although he does intend his audience to pretend that he is. Now ordinarily when a speaker performs an illocutionary act, be it literal and direct or, as is more often the case, nonliteral or indirect,⁹ a *communicative presumption* is operative (Bach and Harnish 1979, 7). That is, the speaker takes it as given that his utterance will be regarded as being made with a communicative intent that is identifiable under the circumstances of utterance, partly on the basis that this presumption is in effect. Correlatively, the hearer takes for granted that the speaker is using his words with an identifiable intent and he relies on this presumption (among others) to identify that intent.¹⁰ In fictional discourse, on the other hand, the communicative presumption is suspended.

It should be noted that feigned reference in a fiction is bound to the world of that fiction. Fictional “reference” is relative to a particular

8. This point should be qualified, for real people can and often do populate fictional worlds. But note that when an author exercises literary license, he cannot be accused of telling falsehoods.

9. That is, the speaker means something other than or more than what he says. See Bach and Harnish (1979, chapter 4) for an account of nonliteral and of indirect acts.

10. We view the inference involved in identifying the attitude being expressed by a speaker as a kind of default reasoning, a notion explained in Bach (1984).

fiction (one story or group of stories, one myth or mythical tradition) or, as Lewis puts it, “different acts of storytelling, different fictions” (1983, 265). So there is no pretence that all fictional characters occupy some unitary all-encompassing fictional world. But even within the confines of a particular world of fiction, say that of *Crime and Punishment*, there is no question as to a certain possible man in particular being Raskolnikov — there are only the recurrent acts by Dostoevsky of feigned reference to Raskolnikov. I can put my point bluntly: it is impossible for a fictional character to have existed. It is not the case that Raskolnikov might have existed, for nothing could count as Raskolnikov’s “coming to life”.

Feigned reference does have one very important feature in common with real reference. Consider Dostoevsky’s many feigned acts of reference to Raskolnikov. Even though there is no question as to which individual Raskolnikov is, these many acts are all feigned acts of reference to the same individual. And the reader is to take them as such. Indeed, he is to treat them in much the same way as he would repeated acts of reference to a real individual. Just as you put everything you hear or read about Nixon into one mental “file”¹¹ (think of the name “Nixon” as the label on this file), so you put everything you read about Raskolnikov into one such file, though of course it does not function as actually being a file on anyone.

I will say nothing more about fictional discourse, for here I am mainly concerned with discourse *about* fiction. Although it may seem harmless to speak of them both as a kind of make-believe or “let’s pretend” (Searle 1969, 78), I prefer to restrict these terms to fictional discourse proper. For in discourse about fiction, we do not refer, not even “to a fictional character” like Sherlock Holmes, as Searle would allow.¹² To be sure, Searle regards reference to fictional characters as pretended reference, but I claim that it is not even that. When we “refer” to a fictional character, what we are really doing is implicitly referring (in the literal sense) to the fiction in which that character

11. I use the notion of mental files in my account of communication-based *de re* thoughts (Bach 1986) and regard mental names as, so to speak, labels on these files.

12. Searle is careful to note that “Sherlock Holmes does not exist at all, which is not to deny that he exists-in-fiction” (*ibid.*, 79), but this is not the most felicitous way to respect Russell’s “feeling for reality”.

occurs. And if you say, “Sherlock Holmes wore a deerstalker hat”, contrary to what Searle maintains (*ibid.*) you are not stating something true (or, if you stated that of Watson, something false). You are implicitly stating that the Sherlock Holmes stories say (or that their author Conan Doyle said) that Holmes wore a deerstalker hat. In short, discourse about fiction is, just as the phrase implies, second-order or indirect discourse — one is implicitly talking about what (the author of) the story says (or implies — see the next section). In particular, in my view “referring” to a fictional character is implicitly referring to the relevant fiction (strictly speaking, to its author) and imputing to it a reference, that is, a feigned reference.

There is nothing make-believe about our discourse about fiction. It is the fiction that is make-believe, not our discourse about it. In talking about a fiction we are performing genuine acts of communication and are expressing real propositional attitudes — attitudes about the fiction and what it says or implies. If I say, “Yossarian feared combat missions”, I am expressing the belief that *Catch 22* said (or at least implied) that Yossarian feared combat missions. I am not referring to Yossarian but am merely ascribing to *Catch 22* (strictly speaking, to Joseph Heller), a feigned reference to Yossarian.

More on Discourse about Fiction

As I have maintained (along with Searle), the language of fiction is perfectly ordinary language put to distinctive uses. Now some philosophers have proposed special operators on sentences in order to explain these uses. Lewis suggests that we regard “descriptions of fictional characters ...” as abbreviations for longer sentences beginning with an operator “In such-and-such fiction ...” (1983, 262). Devitt makes a similar suggestion concerning language about fiction and another one about fictional language itself (1980, 172). Yet there is no need to suppose that “Polonius was an old buffoon” should be read as “In *Hamlet* Polonius was an old buffoon”. Rather, the sentence is being used nonliterally. The sentence is being used to state that in *Hamlet* Polonius was an old buffoon, but no special operator needs to be assigned to the sentence being used nonliterally to make that statement. Of course a speaker can always make fully explicit what he means by including “In *Hamlet*” in his utterance.

The trouble with the operator approach is that it attempts to deal

semantically with a phenomenon that is patently pragmatic. A speaker who is talking about fiction (or a producer of fiction, for that matter) is using a normal sentence differently than normal; he is not using a different sentence. One particular remark by Devitt is a giveaway:

Acceptance of the idea of an operator on a sentence should not be difficult. It seems that a semantic theory will have to allow such operators to explain, for example, irony and metaphor; perhaps also to distinguish assertions, questions, and commands. (1980, 174).

This suggestion is reminiscent of the thoroughly discredited “performative analysis” once popular in linguistics, according to which most sentences contain a hidden performative prefix, such as “I state that ...” or “I order you to ...”, to explain speech acts like statement and orders. Similarly, it might seem that we need prefixes like “In *Hamlet* ...”, “According to myth ...”, or “Legend has it that ...” to explain speech acts about fiction. But the fundamental error in both cases is thinking it necessary to explain the variety of uses of sentences by sentence semantics rather than by the (pragmatic) theory of sentence use.¹³

I have claimed that discourse about fiction is second-order or indirect discourse, although the sentences in it generally do not contain prefixes that would make this explicit. Now I suggested that this discourse can be about either what a fiction says or what it implies. After all, there is much in a fiction that is not made explicit either. But what is it for a fiction to *imply* something? To borrow a distinction from Lewis, what is the difference between truth *according* to a fiction and truth *in* a fiction?

Lewis plausibly suggests that we “analyze statements of truth in fiction as counterfactuals” (1983, 269). The idea is to consider what would be true if a story “were told as known fact rather than fiction” (270). Lewis applies his theory of counterfactuals to formulate several accounts of truth in fiction. On one analysis, we assume the fictional world to be as much like the actual world as possible; on another, we assume the fictional world to be in accordance as much as possible with the generally prevalent beliefs of the community in which the story originates. Lewis seems to prefer the latter to the former,

13. For further discussion see Bach and Harnish (1979, 219-228).

primarily because there can be facts about the actual world which, because unknown to the community of origin, could yield implausible evaluations of statements about fiction. There are several other approaches besides those that Lewis considers. For example, perhaps what matters is not the beliefs that actually prevail but what the storyteller takes them to be. Or, an analysis could emphasize the beliefs of the storyteller himself (compare the case of describing a dream).

Whatever the preferred analysis — perhaps none is to be accepted categorically and the appropriate one depends on the case — it must be acknowledged that statements about fiction should not in general be expected to have definite truth conditions. Once we go beyond what is said explicitly in a story and ask what is implied by it, there may be no determinate answer. There may be too many equally good possibilities, or there may be no determinate set of features about the world in question which are being held fixed for purposes of evaluation. The truth or falsity of many statements about fiction is as indeterminate as the truth or falsity of statements about people's hopes, dreams, fantasies, and delusions.

Nonreferring Referring Expressions

There is nothing special semantically, as to either meaning or reference, about the language of fictional discourse or of discourse about fiction. As John Searle puts it, there are no "changes in the *meanings* of words or other linguistic elements in fictional discourse" (1969, 79). In particular, there is nothing special semantically about the occurrences of proper names in fictional discourse or in discourse about fiction. I suggested earlier that names function mentally as labels on the "files" we maintain on individuals and that fictional names function similarly, except that the files they label are not really on anyone. Linguistically, however, names function differently, and this role is the same whether or not the name is fictional.

I have defended elsewhere (Bach 1981a) a description theory of proper names according to which the semantic role of a name "N" is given by the definite description that mentions it, a description of the form "the bearer of 'N' ". Like any description theory, the "nominal description theory" (NDT) avoids the problems that Frege and Russell made famous concerning existence, identity, and belief

sentences. Moreover, as I argue, NDT is immune to Kripke's (1980) powerful arguments against description theories generally. Also, while Kripke may insist that speaking "as if each name had a unique bearer" (*ibid.*, 7) was merely a simplifying assumption on his part, I argue that his claim that names are rigid designators really fails to do justice to the fact that names commonly have many bearers. In contrast, even though NDT says that the name "George Johnson", for example, is semantically equivalent to the description "the bearer of 'George Johnson' ", shared names present no problem for NDT, at least when enriched with the relevant pragmatic considerations. Then it can be explained why a person is not likely to use "George Johnson" to mean "the bearer of 'George Johnson'" and is likely to be using it in a way analogous to referential uses of definite descriptions.¹⁴ In particular, uses of shared names typically are like referential uses of incomplete descriptions, such as "the refrigerator". A description like this is obviously incomplete and one would not use it to refer to the one and only refrigerator but would use it to refer to a certain refrigerator. Similarly, one would not use "George Johnson" to refer (descriptively) to the unique bearer of that name but would use it to refer objectually to a certain bearer of that name.

As Russell pointed out long ago (1919), his theory of descriptions and his assimilation of ordinary names to descriptions (they are "truncated" descriptions) makes it easy to explain how a name (or a description, for that matter) can be meaningful even if it fails to refer.¹⁵ NDT does the same and, moreover, like Russell's approach it provides for a uniform treatment of names in existence, identity, and belief contexts. Names do not have to be treated as referring in

14. I develop an account of the referential/attribution distinction in Bach (1981b).

15. You do not have to accept Russell's theories to grant this much, but I for one do defend them (Bach (1983), though not without certain disclaimers. Also, I point out that Russell's notion of logically proper names is not idiosyncratic but is in fact closely akin to the notions of logical constants and of rigid designators. However, he denies that ordinary names are logically proper.

certain sentential contexts but not in others. By the same token, if you take a Russellian approach, as I do with NDT, vacuous names and fictional names require no special semantic treatment. They play the same sort of semantic role as ordinary names in the sentences in which they occur.

It is important to appreciate what is wrong with giving names a uniform semantic treatment. Consider that philosophers often describe names (and other singular terms) as “referring expressions” even though they believe that in certain sentential contexts names do not refer or even purport to refer. If this phenomenon is assumed to be significant semantically, it raises a serious problem for any account of the nonreferring function of referring expressions in existence and in belief contexts and, for that matter, of fictional names. Any account which makes this assumption presupposes that the semantic function of an expression, in this case a referring expression, can depend on the sentential context in which it occurs. If a referring expression functions referringly in some contexts and not in others and that fact were significant semantically, then the expression’s semantic contribution to the sentence in which it occurs would have to depend on its sentential context. But this suggests that its very meaning, which presumably determines its semantic contribution, depends on its sentential context. That violates the well-entrenched Principle of Compositionality, according to which the semantic properties of a sentence are a function of the semantic properties of its constituents (where the function in question is determined by the structure of the sentence). The cost of giving up this principle is, as is well known, to be confronted with the seemingly impossible task of explaining the learnability of languages whose grammars cannot be specified recursively.

This entire problem can be avoided if linguistic reference by so-called referring expressions (when they refer) is not construed as part of their semantics. That is precisely the approach taken by Russell’s theory of descriptions and his assimilation of proper names to descriptions. Since I take such an approach to names, as far as I am concerned vacuous names and fictional names raise no special problems at the semantic level. Like any other name, a vacuous or a fictional name is semantically equivalent to the nominal description that mentions it.

This is what I have argued, in reverse order. The language of fiction is ordinary language put to special use. Discourse about

fiction is implicitly indirect discourse. "Reference" to fictional characters is really reference implicitly attributed to a fiction or to its author. In fictional discourse itself the storyteller is pretending to perform ordinary speech acts and to make ordinary references. As for ordinary acts of referring to what does not in fact exist, such acts can be communicatively successful even in the absence of their intended objects, provided they are descriptive rather than objectual. But as for the objects of this discussion, I have said nothing.

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