

Testing theories of reference

The effect of the semantic domain in reference assignment

Theories of reference have been a crucial research topic in analytic philosophy and linguistics along the twentieth-century. The current debate is still characterized by two competing standpoints: the *descriptivist view* of reference, according to which the reference of a proper name is fixed by the individual or object satisfying the descriptive information associated with the proper name (Frege 1892, Searle 1958), and the *causal view* of reference which claims that a name reference is fixed by an initial baptism and the later uses of the proper name successfully refer to the same referent thanks to a causal chain within a linguistic community (Kripke 1980).

Recent empirical works have faced the problem of whether speakers' semantic intuitions are either more descriptivist or causal, showing that: (i) speakers' judgments in reference assignment to proper names are subject to cultural variation (Machery et al. (2004): while Easterns are more likely to show descriptivist intuitions, Westerns possess a cognitive shape that favours causal intuitions; (ii) the same speaker's judgments about reference can rely on either descriptive or causal intuitions, rejecting the idea of descriptivist vs causal populations (Genone & Lombrozo 2012).

This paper presents four experimental works supporting the idea that whether speakers are either more descriptivist or causal depends primarily on *linguistic constraints*. In particular, whether reference assignment depends more either on the conventional use of a proper name within a community or on the descriptive information associated with the name is determined by: (i) the salience of the role played by semantic category of the proper name in use (i.e. person proper names, geographical names, natural kinds names and artefacts names); (ii) the degree of relevance of the description associated with the name.

References

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