

Discussion

Reference Borrowing: a Response to Dunja Jutronić

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Abstract

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Key words:

Dunja Jutronić discusses my causal theory of reference borrowing (2008, in this issue). She rightly insists that a mere causal connection between a speaker and a hearer in a communication situation is not sufficient for the latter to borrow the reference of a proper name from the former. At least, the borrowing has to be an intentional act of the borrower. What more can be said? I say this:

the borrower must process the input supplied by the situation in whatever way is appropriate for gaining, or reinforcing, an ability to use the name to designate its referent. The borrower must intentionally set in motion this particular sort of mental processing even though largely unaware of its nature and perhaps not conscious of doing so. (2006, 101)

Jutronić demands more: "Borrowers need to have some true beliefs about the referent. If so, reference borrowing involves a causal chain of communication combined with some associated description" (sec. II).

Before considering this, I must respond quickly to the following rather puzzling remark about a *description* theory of reference borrowing:

“I do not see why reference borrowing by description has to include the requirement that the borrower has to be able to remember the reference lender or his/her name” (sec. IV). The answer is that the description that the borrower must associate with a name is a description of another person’s reference, as indeed her quote from Strawson makes clear. And you cannot describe a person’s reference without remembering who she is. Indeed, the description theory requires that you can give an identifying description of her. To abandon this requirement is to abandon the theory. In my view, of course, that is just what one should do.¹

In responding to Jutronić’s earlier paper on reference borrowing (2006) I was led to emphasize a distinction that has been little observed in the literature on reference borrowing or deference: the distinction is between what is required at the initial time of borrowing the reference of a name and what is required at the later time of using the borrowed name. Both the initial borrowing and the later using are intentional actions, of course, but, according to the causal theory, the later use *need not involve any intention to defer to the earlier borrowing*; it need not involve any “backward-looking” intention (2006, 101–2). Jutronić now accepts the distinction and this causal-theory claim. So she no longer endorses the criticisms of Thomas Blackburn (1988) and Adele Mercier (1999). However, she still thinks that the causal theory of names goes too far in not requiring any descriptive element in reference borrowing. She thinks that borrowing must involve a true categorial description of the referent.

This raises a question. Jutronić clearly means, at least, that the categorial description needs to be associated with the name in the initial borrowing. But does she think that the description needs to be associated at each subsequent use as well? She does not explicitly say that it need not. And it would certainly be very hard to motivate a descriptivism that demanded the initial association but not the later one. Since Jutronić is partly inspired by the discussion of terms like ‘sloop’ and ‘dagger’ in *Language and Reality* (Devitt and Sterelny 1999, 97–8), it is worth noting that the descriptive-causal theory of reference borrowing that we tentatively propose demands both associations (although we did not make this explicit because we did not have the distinction between initial borrowing and later using at the forefront of our minds). In any case, I shall take Jutronić’s position as demanding both associations.

¹ Searle does seem to abandon the description theory in the passage Jutronić quotes. However Searle’s view of names is really an eccentric description theory. He is prepared to take over many insights of the causal theory but gives them a descriptivist twist based on his internalist view of the contents of perception (1983, ch. 9). I have argued against this internalist view at length (1990). His discussion of reference borrowing in particular (p. 244–6) is vitiated by a misrepresentation of Kripke’s views. Whereas Kripke claims that a person borrowing the reference of a name from a speaker, must, *at the time of borrowing*, intend to use it with the same reference as the speaker (1980, 96), Searle construes him as claiming that a person who has borrowed the reference of a name must, *at the time of using it*, intend to refer to the same object as the person from who he borrowed the name (1983, 244). See the discussion below on the importance of this distinction.

Jutronić thinks that our idea of reference borrowing for kind terms like ‘sloop’ and ‘dagger’ should be extended to names and natural kind terms. We do not. Talking of names, we claim that a person

can pick up a name on a very slender basis, wrongly inferring all sorts of things about its bearer. Perhaps it names a university yet she believes it to name a person, a cat or a river. She is linked into the causal network for the name and so there seems to be no good reason to deny that she uses the name to designate the university.... borrowers do not have to associate the correct categorial term (1999, 79).

Why does Jutronić think otherwise? First of all she raises a question: “Why assume that we can borrow reference for ‘Blanka’ even when we are in a massive ignorance and error state and we cannot do this for ‘sloop’?” This is a good question and I shall return to it.

Jutronić goes on: “How would communication be possible if we were in ignorance and error to such great degree?” (sec. IV) In thinking about this, we need to distinguish what is required for reference with what is typical in communication. These are *very* different matters. Our claim is that people can refer to the famous Croatian high jumper using the name ‘Blanka’ despite being largely ignorant and wrong about her. The claim is *not* that most claims using ‘Blanka’ or any other name are false. Doubtless if most communications with names were false, people would lose interest in receiving these communications. But it does not follow that if most people were ignorant or wrong about named objects they would lose this interest. For, surely, most communications with names are *not* false. So those who are ignorant and wrong have a very real interest in receiving these communications: it’s a way to learn!

So I see no force in Jutronić’s point about communication. But what about her good question: Why treat ‘Blanka’ differently from ‘sloop’?

In *Language and Reality* it may seem as if our claims about the likes of ‘Blanka’ and ‘sloop’ must rest simply on intuitions about reference in situations of ignorance and error. Yet there is a way of testing these claims that does not rest on such referential intuitions. We could conduct experiments by applying the methodology argued for in *Coming to Our Senses* (1996, ch. 2; also 1994).

Here is a brief summary of that methodology. It is natural and appropriate to think that the basic task in semantics is to explain the *meanings* of thoughts and utterances. But this talk of meanings is sadly vague, as many have noted: it is far from clear what counts as a meaning that needs explaining.² We need to be much more precise in identifying the subject matter of semantics. In my view, we should identify the meaning of a thought or utterance with a certain property of the thought or utterance that is crucial to its causal role.³ Of particular interest here are the roles

² “The chief problem about semantics comes at the beginning. What is the theory of meaning a theory of?” (Higginbotham 1991, 271). “Meaning is notoriously vague” (Block 1986, 615). Lycan has brought out the problem wittily with his “Double Indexical Theory of Meaning”: “MEANING =_{def} Whatever aspect of linguistic activity happens to interest *me now*” (Lycan 1984, 272).

³ Paul Horwich has a similar idea (1998, 6).

of thoughts and utterances in causing intentional behavior and informing us about the world. So let us take meanings to be the properties of thoughts and utterances in virtue of which they play those causal roles. How then are we to investigate the nature of these meanings? We look to ordinary opaque attitude ascriptions. Day in and day out, folk, and social scientists, uses “content clauses,” usually ‘that’ clauses, to ascribe properties to thoughts and utterances for the very purpose of explaining behavior and learning about the world. In thus applying their “folk psychology,” they are, in effect, trying to identify the meanings that play the causal roles. Now if the folk and scientists are right in their ascriptions, then what they are ascribing are meanings. And we have good reason to believe that the folk and social scientists are mostly right because their ascriptions are mostly *successful*: they really do explain behavior and guide us to the world. The center of the theorist’s task of explaining meanings then becomes the discovery of what is common and peculiar to the thoughts and utterances that are ascribed the *same* meaning by a content clause. And the main conclusion I came to in the book is that what is common and peculiar to the meaning we ascribe to a word is a property of *referring to something in a certain way; a mode of reference*.

We can now apply this methodology to test whether a person who is competent with a name ‘*a*’ or a kind term ‘*F*’ must associate any description we like to choose with the term. So we can test any description theory of the term. And, more to the point, we can test whether someone assumed to have borrowed the term must associate a categorial term with it.

These tests start by gathering some subjects who are sufficiently expert about *a* or *F*s for there to be no doubt that they are competent with the relevant term: if anyone participates in the convention that relates the term to its referent, these subjects do. For example, if ‘*a*’ were ‘Blanka’, the subjects would be knowledgeable about the career of the high jumper, knowing that she won at the World Championship in Osaka, and so on; and if ‘*F*’ were ‘sloop’, the subjects would be knowledgeable about sail boats, knowing that a sloop is a boat having a single mast with a mainsail and jib. If necessary, the subjects can be supplied with some of this information. Then the subjects are told some stories, each involving a different character. In these stories the characters use ‘*a*’ or ‘*F*’ several times to make statements ask questions, and so on. The stories reveal that these characters vary greatly in their knowledge of *a* or *F*s one being knowledgeable, one being largely ignorant and wrong, and others being in between. Then, the experiment seeks to discover what thoughts and utterances the subjects attribute to these characters using ‘*a*’ or ‘*F*’ in content clauses. Do subjects assert that a character believes that...*a*..., said that...*F*..., wonders whether ...*a*..., and so on? The experiment might simply ask the subjects their opinions on these matters. However it would be better to try to elicit the opinions by asking the subjects to say how they explain the behaviour of the characters

and what, if anything, they have learnt from the characters.⁴ These attributions by the subjects are significant because we theorists can then reason as follows. If the subjects are right in the contents they ascribe, then those contents will all be *about a or Fs*: the attributions won't be right unless the thoughts and utterances of the characters co-refer with the subjects' '*a*' or '*F*' and the subjects' '*a*' refers to *a* or their '*F*' refers to *Fs*. And we have good reason to suppose that the subjects will mostly be right in their attributions: first, we can expect the subjects to be, like the rest of us, *generally* successful in ascribing contents to explain behavior and gain information about the world; second, given their indubitable competence with '*a*' or '*F*', there is no reason to suppose that this general success will not be exemplified in this particular context. And note that, although these attributions reflect folk psychology, they do not deploy any semantic concepts like REFERENCE and so do not draw on a folk semantics in which we should not put a great deal of trust.

So we have very good reason to believe that any thought or utterance of a character that the subjects describe using 'that...*a*...' *refers to a* and describe using 'that...*F*...' *refers to Fs*. So we can look to what is common and peculiar to these thoughts and utterances to discover what is required for referring successfully with '*a*' or '*F*'. The anti-descriptivist predicts that a character need not associate true descriptions of *a* or *Fs*: ignorance and error should make no difference to the readiness of the subjects to ascribe thoughts and utterances about *a* or *Fs* to characters.

Where our particular concern is to test whether reference borrowers must associate categorial terms, it should be clear from the stories that all the characters' uses of '*a*' or '*F*' arise from the communications of others and not from any direct acquaintance with *a* or *Fs*. And the ignorant character would make utterances indicating that she does not associate the right categorial term with '*a*' or '*F*'; for example, "I think Blanka is a town in Croatia?" and "Aren't sloops some kind of cutting instrument?" My view of names predicts that subjects will be as ready to ascribe Blanka-thoughts to the ignorant character as to the knowledgeable. So they will be prepared to say that the ignorant character believes that Blanka is a town. Jutrović has the opposite prediction. My tentative proposal about 'sloop', in contrast, predicts that subjects will not be as ready to ascribe sloop-thoughts to the ignorant. So they will be reluctant to say that the ignorant character wonders whether sloops are cutting instruments. Jutrović shares this prediction.

I confess to being far from confident which predictions would be confirmed.

⁴ The model here is "the technique of elicited production" that some psycholinguists have used so effectively on children; see Crain *et al.* 2005, section 4, for a nice summary.

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