

Proper Names Do Not Exist

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Since Frege (1892)¹ we have come to believe that the difference between “a=a” and “a=b” has to do, at least partly, with a difference in “the elements of form that are independent of semantics” [Kaplan,1990:94]². Whether you think such differences are enough, or that semantics must get involved, you are bound to accept a strong metaphysical thesis, namely, that proper names exist *qua* lexical items of any given natural language and, thus, that we have, at least, a rough way to distinguish between proper names and expressions from other lexical types as well as between intuitively different proper names. I shall argue that proper names do not exist *qua* lexical items of natural language.

1. What are Names?

Kaplan (1990) offers a naturalistic view of words according to which “utterances and inscriptions are *stages* of words, which are the *continuants* made up of these interpersonal stages and some *intrapersonal* stages.”[98] On this view, words are spatiotemporal objects persisting through time, space, and historical changes. They have a historical origin, an evolution, and, presumably, an end. Proper names, persist through time by being repeated in resembling ways. Our use of ‘Phosphorus’ resembles the Babylonian astronomer’s use of it, just as ‘Aristotle’ somewhat resembles the original ancient Greek. Repetition plays a crucial role as mere resemblance is not enough, the relevant inscriptions must be intended as repetitions. Kaplan (1990) dubs this the “common currency” conception of words. Kaplan (1990) claims proper names are *common currency* just as any other word. But there is something distinct about names. On the one hand, proper names are singular terms, so intimately related to their referents that we naturally consider homophonic and homographic names with distinct referents to be distinct words. On the other hand, proper names are generic words from which common currency, singular term, proper names appear to stem. Kaplan (1990) argues that both of these dimorphic entities are part of the lexicon.

2. Proper Names Do Not Exist

I believe proper names cannot be part of the lexicon. First, because, as Frege (1892) pointed out, the admissible regularities having to do with sound and spelling patterns for name creation are too thin. Second, because, as Kaplan (1990) himself shows, the admissible regularities having to do with social control are fundamentally political and, thus, too heterogenous to be considered of any linguistic relevance. And, third, because there are linguistic reasons not to consider names part of the lexicon. As Ziff (1960) shows, names exhibit no proper regularities in their use, even allowing for homophones with identical semantic value to be distinct words (Kaplan, 1990). And there appears to be no “significance of any possible lexical marking” [Borer, 2005:78]³ for names.

¹ Frege, G. 1892. “On sense and nominatum” in H. Feigl, and W. Sellars *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, 1949, Appleton-Century-Crofts, USA.

² Kaplan, D. 1990. “Words”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 64, 93-119.

³ Borer, H. 2005. *Structuring Sense Volume 1. In Name Only*. Oxford, UK. Oxford University Press.