

Proper Names without Semantics

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1. The View

There are at least two substantial ideas guiding the discussion about the nature of ordinary proper names in natural language. First, there is the idea that proper names must have a semantics, either referentialist or predicativist.¹ It is generally assumed that these, or variations of them, are the only explanatory alternatives. Second, there is the idea that what Kripke (1980)² calls the “rigidity” of an ordinary proper name must be a semantic feature.³ These ideas include the vast majority of the literature on proper names: descriptivism, predicativism, referentialism and variabilism, all of which assume that proper names have a semantic value, namely, a referent, a definite description or a metalinguistic definite description or a mix of these.

A third kind of view has been offered. Initiated by Ziff (1960)⁴ and somewhat endorsed by Kripke (1980), it holds that ordinary proper names have no meaning. A recent development is Saab and Lo Guercio’s (2020) “no name” view, according to which ordinary proper names have “no detectable meanings” before syntax but are “the result of a particular syntactic configuration” [Saab and Lo Guercio, 2020:60]⁵. In this paper we want to explore a more acute version of this view. We follow Ziff (1960) in claiming that proper names have no semantics – not even syntactically driven – but serve as mere placeholders for a suitable contextual pragmatic assignment. The resulting view holds:

Syntax:

given a name, e.g. ‘Alfred’, there is a syntactic root $\sqrt{\text{ALFRED}}$ that, accompanied by an n -feature, forms the $[n+\sqrt{\text{ALFRED}}]$ complex that may combine with a phase head.

Proper names have a lexical Root with no encoded meaning (i.e., either referential or descriptive). A particular syntactic scheme is needed to determine if the name Root is a determiner phrase or a predicate, none of which has a semantic realization.

Pragmatics:

Bare uses of names in conversational contexts convey the following information either by assumption, presupposition or regularity: (i) there is one object per name; (ii) the referent of the use is the most salient object in the context; and (iii) the salient object is named by the name used.

¹ This includes Kripke’s (1980) distinction between meaning and reference, as either one, or both are meant to be semantic.

² Kripke, S. 1980. *Naming and Necessity*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA: USA.

³ But see Geurts, B. 1997. “Good news about the description theory of names”. *Journal of Semantics*, 14, 319-348.

⁴ Ziff, P. 1960. *Semantic Analysis*. Ithaca: NY. Cornell University Press.

⁵ Saab, A. and Lo Guercio, N. 2020. “No name: The alloosemy view”. *Studia Lingüística*. 74, 1, 60-97.

Identity condition (i) helps speakers acquire new names (see Hall, 2002⁶) by assuming a one-object-name correspondence and, thus, that different names correspond to different objects.⁷ Salience condition (ii) helps speakers fix a referent in context (see Lewis, 1979⁸). Being-called condition (iii) is partly a consequence of (i) and a useful tool for tracking object-name relations (see Predelli, 2013 and 2017⁹). The use of proper names contributes to the interpretation of the syntactic structures in which their name Root appears. Such contributions, as well as the inferences they allow (whether referential or predicative), have a pragmatic source. Pragmatic interpretation is, however, not unrestricted. Proper names may not be freely interpreted as either nouns or predicates. Their interpretative parameter is restricted by the syntactic scheme in which they appear.

2. Arguments for the View

Ziff's (1960) central argument for this type of view stands on the thesis that "it is not possible to state a simple strong generalization about proper names. One can only say what is so for the most part and that must be qualified." [1960:§106:93] For example, unlike common nouns, proper names do not seem to belong to a single natural language, 'football player' belongs to English and 'futbolista' to Spanish, yet 'Leo Messi' does not seem to belong to any single one. "Leo Messi is an extraordinary football player" is not a mixed sentence using English and Spanish. Also, referents do not seem to be of essence. Some proper names have an associated spatiotemporal referent (e.g., 'Messi', 'Einstein'), but others do not (e.g., 'Achilles', 'Pegasus')¹⁰; and for those that do, nothing hangs on the referent's existence (e.g., 'Albert Einstein' does not mean less now that the associate referent no longer exists). Like fictional descriptions, fictional proper names demand no spatiotemporal referent. Unlike the former, the latter must do their job without the help of any descriptive information semantically assigned to their parts.

Moreover, reference may be fixed in variegated ways. Some names get their associate referent directly (e.g., 'Careful don't step on Rudolf', as I point to my newly baptized pet turtle); others demand a host of information (e.g., 'Teophile Guatier was a French writer'). And, of course, there are the multiple syntactic positions they can hold. Proper names can be numberless DPs (e.g., 'Jon is a great person') but also predicates (e.g., 'There are three Jons in this room'). And last, but not least, proper names are typically rigid, but may also fail to be so (see Ziff, 1977; Lewis, 1986;)¹¹.

⁶ Hall, G., 2002. "Semantics and the acquisition of proper names." In *Language, Logic, and Concepts* edited by R. Jackendoff, P. Bloom and K. Wynn, 337–72. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

⁷ Ziff, P. 1960:104 offers an argument to the claim that proper names are identity keepers. There is anthropological support for this claim from the social struggle of name-recovery, as witnessed by the ongoing search for persons (now adults) who were kidnapped as babies in Argentina in the 1970s and are still now in search of their real name.

⁸ Lewis, D., 1979. "Scorekeeping in a language game", *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 8, 339-359.

⁹ Predelli, S. 2013. *Meaning without Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Predelli, S. 2017. *Proper Names. A Millian Account*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ Like Ziff (1960), we are assuming that there are no non-spatiotemporal objects, and that no such objects are intended to be the referent of fictional names. See Garcia-Ramirez, E. 2011. "A Cognitive Theory of Empty Names." *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 2, 785–807 (2011). Lewis (1978) offers spatiotemporal referential candidates for fictional names, but his view requires the postulation of a plurality of concrete, spatiotemporal, possible worlds and individuals. See Lewis, D. (1978). Truth in Fiction. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15(1), 37–46.

¹¹ Ziff (1977) offers the following example as evidence: "A somewhat paranoid instructor attempts to insult Dean Gaskin at a party by making sarcastic remarks about a recent decision of the Dean. However, the instructor mistook Professor Harmon for the Dean. Afterwards, one of the instructor's colleagues knowing what he had done went up to him and said 'You are a lucky fool; you insulted the wrong man. If Harmon had been Gaskin, and he might have been, you'd be in real trouble.'" [1977:325-326]. If 'Harmon' and 'Gaskin' are rigid, then the possibility brought up by the concerned colleague would not be a live one. See Ziff, P. 1977. "About proper names". *Mind*. 86, 343, 319-332. See also chapter 4 of Lewis, D. 1986. *On The Plurality of Worlds*. Blackwell: UK, for a discussion of rigidity vs quasi-rigidity.

They may have bare-singular uses that, nevertheless, denote different referents within a single scenario. Such is the case with ‘William Bruce Jenner’ in (1), evaluated within context (2).

- (1) William Bruce Jenner could have been a woman.
- (2) Consider a possible world where Bruce Jenner is a male olympic decathlete who spends his entire life convinced of being male. Caitlyn Jenner, on the other hand, is an olympic decathlete who, at age 66, decides to undergo a gender transition, thus becoming a woman. Bruce Jenner and Caitlyn Jenner are not identical.

William Bruce Jenner could have been Bruce Jenner in (2), making (1) false. But he could have also been Caitlyn Jenner, making (1) true. The inconstant denotation of ‘William Bruce Jenner’ cannot be accounted for if semantics requires an assignment of one and the same an entity as content. Beware, this is not a problem of counterpart assignment. Counterpart theory has no problems assigning a referent to (1) in the context of (2). The problem is that, under any view of counterparthood, there is more than one referent assigned in a single possible world (i.e., that of (2)). This goes against the generally accepted view that, when used referentially, names have a semantically determined value (i.e., a referent) and that *it* remains fixed across modal contexts.¹² What (1) and (2) show is that reference is not so (semantically) fixed, as it may be shifted given the appropriate context, such as (2).

Further evidence that proper names have no semantics comes from psycholinguistics and neurology. The acquisition of proper names has primacy over the rest of the lexicon, requiring no more than prelinguistic preparedness. They demand much less conceptual resources than any other category. Memory-wise they make high demands on the cognitive system; and they exhibit selective damage and preservation in anomia (see Garcia-Ramirez and Shatz, 2011, for a review)¹³. Proper names are costly because they establish a single link between name and associated referent or representation. They carry little to no information (see Semenza, 2009).^{14,15} As Garcia-Ramirez and Shatz, 2011 argue, the empirical evidence consistently shows that the distinctness of proper names from other lexical categories is owed to their lack of semantic information. It is precisely the lack of conceptual resources within reach of proper name processing that make the memory task so costly. As Bredart, Brennen, and Valentine (1996)¹⁶ show, proper names are costly because they have little to no associated information – i.e., lexicalized or not – that may offer alternative entry points. This informational isolation is confirmed by evidence of double dissociation of proper names in aphasia, as they may be either selectively impaired or preserved. Miceli, et.al. (2000) report on a patient with selective damage for proper names but not common nouns. Semenza, Sartori, and D’Andrea (2003) report on a patient unable to name familiar faces, who could describe familiar people, and who could identify familiar faces when given the name.¹⁷ Consistent with this

¹² Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising the issue about counterpart theory.

¹³ Garcia-Ramirez, E., and Shatz, M. 2011. “On problems with descriptivism: Psychological assumptions and empirical evidence.” *Mind & Language*, 26, 1, 53-77.

¹⁴ Semenza, C. 2009: “The neuropsychology of proper names”. *Mind & Language*, 24, 349–71. See also Semenza, C., Graná, A., Cocolo, R., Longobardi, G. and Di Benedetto, P. 2002: “Proper names and noun-to-determiner movement in aphasia: a case study”. *Brain and Cognition*, 48, 542–45.

¹⁵ See Gollan, T. and Bonanni, P. 2005. “Proper names get stuck on bilingual and monolingual speakers’ tip of the tongue equally often”. *Neuropsychology*, 19, 3, p: 278.

¹⁶ Bredart, S., Brennen, T., and Valentine, T. 1996. *The Cognitive Psychology of Proper Names. On the importance of being Ernest*. London: Routledge.

¹⁷ Miceli, G., Capasso, R., Daniele, A., Esposito, T., Magarelli, M. and Tomaiuolo, F. 2000. “Selective deficit for people names following left temporal damage: an impairment of domain specific conceptual knowledge.” *Cognitive Neuropsychology*, 17, 489–516; Semenza, C., Sartori, G. and D’Andrea, J. 2003. “He can tell which master craftsman blew a Venetian vase, but he cannot name the Pope: a patient with a selective difficulty in naming faces.” *Neuroscience*

(conceptually and informationally) frugal view of proper names, multiple studies of Canidae show that dogs have the cognitive resources to process and acquire proper names competently.¹⁸

3. Explanatory Virtues of the View

Giving no semantics has multiple explanatory advantages. First, it accounts for the syntactic plasticity of proper names, allowing for bare and non-bare uses. Proper names may be accompanied by any category – given a suitable syntactic environment – since they lack semantic restrictions. How exactly this interaction takes place depends on syntax and pragmatic context.

We follow Saab and Lo Guercio (2020) in claiming that every proper name has a root (e.g., $\sqrt{\text{ALFRED}}$), this root is accompanied by a human/animate feature at n (e.g., $n_{\text{human}} + \sqrt{\text{ALFRED}}$). The [n +Root] complex is common to referential and predicative uses of names, as “the same phase head combines with the same indexed Root” [Saab and Lo Guercio, 2020:11] at the first phase. The difference between referential and predicative uses emerges relative to the functional head that the lower [n +Root] complex combines with: a numberless DP in referential uses and a null noun in predicative ones. Each combination delivers a different model-theoretic object at $n\mathbf{P}$ level. When combined with a numberless DP the [n +Root] complex demands an e -type object, while the null noun combination an $\langle e, t \rangle$ type one. Since there is no semantic level, both referential and predicative uses are underdetermined, i.e., their value varies from occurrence to occurrence relative to speaker meaning and conversational context. Thus, their value is assigned relative to contextual features such as identity, salience, familiarity and use-based regularities (see Ziff, 1960; Lewis, 1979; and Predelli, 2013 and 2017). This same mechanism may also account for non-bare uses of proper names by appealing to the expressivity of proper names. Saab (2021)¹⁹ offers a detailed account for the case of honorifics; and Oggiani and Aguilar Guevara (2023)²⁰ for proper names accompanied by personal articles.

Second, the [n +Root] structure may account for further morphological evidence. In Spanish, for example, some proper names have related pairs Alejandro/Alejandra, Francisco/Francisca; and appear to have a “relative ordering of derivational morphology”²¹, “Paqu-it-o-s” “Paqu-it-a-s”. This is evidence that names have a syntactic structure, which is accounted for by name Root and the [n +Root] complex when combined with more syntactic structure. This syntactic structure is visible to grammar. What is not visible and, strictly speaking is not opaque either, is the semantics. There is none.

Third, having no semantics may solve the problem of referential inconstancy, as per (1) and (2). Without a semantic assignment of an entity as denotation, the e -type value assigned to the numberless DP in referential uses is purely dependent upon contextual pragmatic assignment, thus making the interpretation sensitive to contextual variations (e.g., modal variations). As a consequence, proper name rigidity is no longer a semantic feature. Kripke (1980) does not say whether rigidity is semantic or pragmatic but insists that proper names are “*de jure* [rigid], where the reference of a designator is *stipulated* to be a single object, whether we are speaking of the actual world or a counterfactual situation.” [1980:21;fn21] Given a pragmatic understanding of this

Letters, 352, 73–75. See Semenza, C. 2009. “The neuropsychology of proper names”. *Mind & Language*, 24, 349–71 for a detailed review of studies on proper name impairment / preservation.

¹⁸ See Kaminski, J., Call, J., Fischer, J., 2004. “Word learning in the domestic dog: evidence for “fast mapping.”” *Science*, 304, 1682–1683; Pilley, J.W., and Reid, A.K. 2011. “Border collie comprehends object names as verbal referents”, *Behavioural Processes*, 86, 184-195.

¹⁹ Saab, A. 2021. “A short note on honorifics and personal articles in Spanish and Catalan. Consequences for the theory of proper names.” *Isogloss. Open Journal of Romance Linguistics*. 7, 6:1-14.

²⁰ Oggiani, C. and Aguilar-Guevara, A. 2023. “Affective proximity: Determined proper names in Rioplatense Spanish” Typescript. Udelar, UNAM.

²¹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing up this issue.

“stipulation”, we can also explain why bare singular uses – or most of them – are rigid in this sense. A contextual account of referential uses of proper names can make room for a pragmatic, stipulative view of rigidity.

Fourth, since the contribution of a given *use* of a proper name is determined by the syntax and pragmatics *of the particular context* of use we can readily explain predicative inferences, such as why (3b) seems to follow from an *assertion* of (3a).²²

- (3) a. Mary is a Queen of Scots.
- b. A Queen of Scots is called Mary.
- c. Mary is the name of a Queen of Scots.

If an assertion of (3a) is accepted, the conversational background will include (3c) as a presupposition, as speakers using ‘Mary’ in (3a) typically presuppose that ‘Mary’ is a name and that it names an object (see Predelli, 2013 and 2017; see Saab and Lo Guercio, 2020). With (3c) in the common ground (see Predelli, 2013 and 2017), (3b) follows directly. This example illustrates the relevance of contextual pragmatic features, as the truth of (3b) does not simply follow from the truth of (3a). For consider a possible scenario where Mary is a Queen of Scots but nobody calls her Mary, she is named Elizabeth instead. In such a scenario, (3a) is true but does not entail (3b), and (4) turns out to be false (see Kripke, 1980:69, on the non-triviality of asserting (4)).

- (4) Mary is called Mary (by someone).

Fifth, and last, having no semantics straightforwardly accounts for the empirical evidence coming from psycholinguistics and neurology, demanding an understanding of proper names as a unique, primitive, and thus outstanding part of the lexicon with little to no information associated. Naturally, the view also explains why, unlike common nouns, proper names do not seem to belong to a single language, and why they may or may not have an associate spatiotemporal referent, as per Ziff (1960).

4. Closing Remarks

Kripke (1980) is commonly read as proposing a referentialist, rigid semantics for proper names. Yet Kripke (1980) frequently insists that proper names have no meaning, and that we should not look for a semantics of names in his work. He departs from Ziff (1960) since the latter denies “that names have meaning at all even *more strongly* than [Kripke] would” [1980:32] by claiming that names are not part of language.²³ We do not claim the latter. Defending no semantics for names is consistent with Kripke’s insights: (i) proper names have no meaning (connotation) but only denotation²⁴; (ii) “intuitively [...] proper names are rigid designators” [1980:49]; and (iii) rigidity may be determined by context “where the reference of a designator is *stipulated* to be a single object, whether we are speaking of the actual world or a counterfactual situation.” [1980:21;fn21].²⁵

²² Thanks to an Anonymous referee for raising this issue.

²³ Italics are ours. See Kripke, 1980:32; and fn9.

²⁴ “It is not part of the *meaning* of ‘Dartmouth’ that the town so named lies at the mouth of the Dart.” [1980:26]

²⁵ “There is no reason why we cannot *stipulate* that, in talking about what would have happened to Nixon in a certain counterfactual situation, we are talking about what would have happened to *him*. [1980:44]