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## **A Problem in the Theory of Reference: The Linguistic Division of Labor and the Social Character of Naming**

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Having been concerned so long about names in the abstract I didn't think enough about names in the concrete to think of the title of my paper until fairly recently before this talk. I've been known to emphasize that the connotation of names and the properties associated with them may be misleading; and, in this case, one thing is misleading: ordinarily a title indicates the speaker's intention, or it often does, to sort of advocated and develop the subjects mentioned in the title. But, in fact, a good deal of what I am to do is to issue a sort of *monitum*, as they say in the Vatican, against some of the suggestions that may be carried by these theories. I found it hard to do a proper job in a twenty-five minute talk so I will only be able to skim the outline. I thought I could concentrate on this one aspect of a clarification of where my own views may have been misunderstood, especially in relation to those of Hillary Putnam and maybe I'll be able to do that, but I am not even completely sure.

Now the general context in which the problem that I am going to talk about arises is the distinction between what might be called classical versus more recent theories of reference. And examples of more recent theories are my own, which I primarily of course have in mind, also Professor Putnam's and there have been others. This difference applies both to natural kind terms and to ordinary proper names which on the newer theory anyway are closely analogous.

The classical theory, as one knows, emphasized, in the case of natural kind terms, a set of properties, those properties the speaker ordinarily use to identify the kind, such as gold, those normally used in the community, and took them to be definitive of the term "gold". The more recent theory, by contrast, objects to this in several ways of which I might mention two. First, that the surface features, as Putnam especially has emphasized and I have too, used to identify the object, may in fact turn out to be false of the kind in question. It may not be true that gold has the properties, even such as yellowness or being a metal, that we normally think we associate with gold. This could in the future turn out to be false. Second, on the other hand, however, even if the surface features are correct, they are not definitive of the kind because another kind might resemble this in the appropriate surface features, but actually be a totally different kind. Thus, on the newer picture, one could roughly – well, inadequately I think, but for the purpose of this talk, I even talk sometimes as if this rough characterization were literal – take a kind to be defined as in terms of a

sample that speakers have had. The kind consists of those things which are, in the relevant aspects, of the same substance, of the same stuff as that sample, as in the case of gold. Something which is not of the same stuff as our ordinary sample of gold is not even gold even if it resembles it in all our surface tests.

In the case of proper names, the classical theory – here it has less of a right perhaps to be called classical, but is associated with such great names as Frege and Russell – held that the name was defined by description or, in more recent variance, by cluster of descriptions true of the object, and believed that the referent is whatever satisfies the descriptions. A more recent view, say for example in my own ranks, has objected that speakers may not possess even sufficiently identifying descriptions to determine the referent in this manner. For example, Cicero may be named only as the famous Roman orator and, even if the descriptions are uniquely identifying, they may be wrong or false of the referent in question. Thus, for example, Peano is often identified by a large portion of the linguistic community as the man who invented certain axioms. It is said that these axioms were actually discovered by Dedekind, but the name “Peano” doesn’t therefore refer to Dedekind. Perfectly useless this summary. Those who knew it were bored. Those who didn’t were not illuminated, I’m sure. But perhaps we have to do it now.

The newer theory says that, in contrast to the classical theory, we get the reference from the name by a chain of communication preserving the name from link to link back to initial baptism. We trace the way the name actually came to me. This is the case of the name of a famous historical figure such as Peano. Now this has often called the causal theory of reference. But in a way, aside from my not liking the term “theory” here, it makes the relation of causation a bit too primitive. What to me is really essential here is the following feature of language for the purposes of communication. And this part of the idea of a social nature of language I like to praise. That is, it is normally thought that first a given individual speaker over time normally preserves the relevant linguistic features of his terms. If these express predicate concepts, these may be properties. If these are names on the Millian picture it should be the referent. Similarly in communication and language learning, the relevant linguistic features are normally intended to be preserved without any explicit intentions having to be entered into. In this case, where the Millian picture is that the important and relevant feature of a name is the reference, it is the reference which will be preserved. Reference shifts can occur, as other kinds of shifts can occur, but these will have to be exceptions accounted for by special features of the situation rather than as the norm. Dagfin Føllesdal has mentioned this and perhaps I will be able to go into this question in discussion of reference shift.

Now, given this summary, I wish to place in context a certain type of remark which has been made by one friend or advocate of the theory, namely Putnam, and also by a well-known critic, Michael Dummett. Putnam has emphasized in his writings what he called “the linguistic division

of labor.” Dummett, taking off from Putnam’s remarks, has argued that once we see this point we see that the new theory is really just a social version of Frege’s old theory, that other aspects of the theory are misleading. And indeed in a review of the recent edition of my book,<sup>1</sup> the reviewer said this was one of the most important problems and ought to have been discussed in the preface.

So I wish to make a clarification of what my own views are on this point. I think that because of the identity or proximity of much of what I have said to what Putnam has said on the issues about natural kinds, and I specially mean the old Putnam who wrote the papers on natural kinds and semantics in the period in question, it has been presumed that the slogan, the linguistic division of labor, was a part of my views too. Indeed Hilary Putnam, in one of his recently done papers has even said that “Kripke and I agree among other things on the importance of the concept of the division of linguistic labor.” Now, actually, I think the term “division of linguistic labor” contains a strong *suggestio falsi*. I don’t know that it is false or wrong because, as meant by Putnam, it may be right. Almost all the connotations that I can gather from it, and especially the ones that have been taken over by others such as Dummett, seem to me to be, first and most important, I suppose, false and, second, and perhaps therefore, incompatible with the quite correct things Putnam has said elsewhere, even in the same papers that emphasized this concept.

Let me say why. What does Putnam talk about in his papers? I’ll stick to the example of gold which came in here. Most of us, who are not either chemists or jewelers or what have you, have only rather crude tests for identifying gold. Perhaps we cannot distinguish fool’s gold from gold. A smaller and more special proportion of the linguistic community can make this distinction, they can make the test. And so Putnam argues, this engenders a division of linguistic labor. Everyone to whom gold is important for any reason has to acquire the word “gold,” but he does not have to acquire the method of recognizing if something is or is not gold. He can rely on a special subclass of speakers. The features that are generally thought to be present in connection with the general names, necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in the extension, ways of recognizing it and so on, are all present in the linguistic community considered as a collective body. But the collective body divides the labor and a special role in this labor comes to the experts.

Now I wish to think about this. It is of course true that the experts have a special capacity that we don’t have for telling whether something is or is not gold. That is among other things what makes them experts. So far, I don’t see that one has to refer to linguistic division of labor here or to any special linguistic capacity of the experts. Consider any ordinary predicate such as, for example, “member of the French Cabinet, Minister of State, in the twentieth century.” Experts, that is historians of France, are much better at telling whether a given named individual falls into the extension of this term than, say, I am, though I know a bit about it. This does not in itself imply

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<sup>1</sup> Kripke, S. (1980). *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press. 3

anything that ought to be called linguistic division of labor. There is no reason to think that the extension of the term in my mouth depends on the existence or availability of any special class of experts in this sense. The term just means what it does. It may be difficult or hard to determine whether something is in the extension; this is a special problem of what we are going to know. Sometimes we may not know what terms are in the extension, what objects are in the extension or not, for a very long time. But the experts provide no help as far as actually determining the extension of the term. They only help us find out after a while which things actually fall into the extension of the term.

Now, suppose we took the hypothesis literally, though I don't think it is in fact in literature. I don't think there is any such definition that a term like gold meant "of the same kind of substance as this," with demonstrative reference to a given example. The term can mean what it does in my mouth and have a determinate extension. It can have the same meaning and the same determinate extension in the mouth of the expert. Whether the expert is even right or wrong on what he places into the extension or whether the expert exists or not has nothing to do with what the extension of this term is. The presence of the experts in no way crucial to the term having a determinate extension. Of course, the expert is much better at telling what falls under the extension than I am, I mean he is an expert just by virtue of that capacity. An expert may be a fancied expert. There may be scientific misinformation around, or an expert may be an alchemist or an astrologer or what have you, and then have got the extension all wrong in terms of his judgments. But this has in itself no effect on the extension of the term. I think the idea that he expert has a special linguistic function here is really a hang-up from the older idea of an operational test that we all apply, that determines whether something, a given object, falls or does not fall under the given term. Given that view, the expert would have special semantic powers. But Putnam himself realizes and emphasizes that this is not the right picture, but that way back in the time of the Ancient Greeks the term "gold," he says in the same paper, had the very same extension that it does now, in spite of unavailability perhaps, in that time, of a relevant class of experts. So I don't know exactly what he may have in mind to say here. But those who have read into his writings a conclusion that the presence of a relevant class of experts is linguistically crucial for determining the extension or in any way the meaning of the term have got him wrong. It's incompatible with what he says elsewhere. And I actually think the use of the term, "the linguistic division of labor," does indeed suggest this and, in this way, as I say, carries a strong *suggestio falsi*. This is the nub of my argument in the case of natural kind terms.

Now I do think, in a more refined picture, when we go into other kinds of mentions of the role of experts, Putnam has other examples. The example of the elm and the beech that he gives is different. Someone who could not distinguish between gold and silver would probably be thought to be in a poor position to talk about gold. But it is quite possibly true that we don't demand of

every speaker that he be able to distinguish between an elm and a beech as Putnam says that he cannot. But this does not ascribe a special function to experts like botanists. There are many who are better at identifying such trees. I remember other children myself. Certainly there must be some people who possess the rough surface tests for making the distinction analogous to the gold and silver case. Maybe those of us with less information can rely on them. I don't know if their current existence is crucial for the distinction, but certainly their existence at one time at least was, otherwise we shouldn't have the terms elm and beech. This is not a case of a special role for the expert and the scientist; it just means that in some cases people may be able to speak without possessing the full stereotypes in even Putnam's sense of the term.

There are other cases. Perhaps I should only name them, they can come up in discussion. There are of course technical terms confined to the experts themselves. These present no special problems. But there are also terms that are originated by the experts and then spread into the community. This is a different kind of natural kind terms from the case where the expert finds out the properties of the natural kind after it has been identified by the more common man. This can be true in the case of a natural kind term or even in the case of a fancied artifact. Most people wouldn't know what a transistor radio is exactly or they may even be able to differentiate it by something that operates on some other principle. Here I think the expert does have special linguistic powers but that is because these experts invented both the radios in this case and the term, and it spread from them into the community. This is not a case of a special role of experts but rather a fact that the originator of the name or term had special authority in terms of initial baptism, just to put things very briefly.

Another role of experts is in connection with the reference shift mentioned by Føllesdal. They can be guardians against contamination of samples by spurious items, which then may take over the role of the central items and change the reference of the kind if we don't watch out. This happens fairly rarely, but it could happen with experts. The more experts there are around the less likely this is to occur.

Given this, I therefore argue that, in the case of natural kind terms, experts have no special linguistic authority. As Hilary Putnam says himself in another passage "there are just people who know a lot about gold," they do not have any kind of authority analogous to the *Académie Française*, a special authority over the extension of the term.

Let me then go to the conclusion which has been drawn by one critic, Michael Dummett, that the current or the new theory is really just a social version of Frege's theory. A slogan, "social version of Frege's theory," is in itself a little hard to force out. I have to give a little of my own exegesis in order to get it to be sufficiently definite as an issue. I take the classical Fregean theory, modified even in a cluster form, to be that each individual has its own cluster of descriptions. Some of them are weighted and the referent of a term is a thing satisfying most of them, say a proper

name. The corresponding social theory would take the community wide cluster of beliefs. It would assign a special weight, perhaps, because of the importance of the role of experts, to a distinguished subclass. This subclass is to be called “the experts;” their beliefs and their views have much more weight than those of other common speakers who may have all kinds of erroneous beliefs. So I suppose the idea in the Peano example is that, though most of us may have thought Peano was the inventor of the so-called Peano axioms and so on, a special class of experts, historians of mathematics or something, know better and they know other descriptions applying to Peano that are really true. Their views get a special weight in the community-wide determining of the reference, and they determine the reference even for those speakers who have an erroneous description. Similarly those speakers who have an inadequate description, such as “Cicero was a Roman orator,” are relying on a special class of experts, the classicists. Dummett thinks that exactly the same thing is going on of course in the case of gold. He thinks that the experts have a special role in determining the extension.

Now, the latter, I think, I have already argued against. But I will say something about this in the case of proper names too. And I want to talk about the general conception of the social theory, the Fregean social theory. Dummett has emphasized that by “the community” he means the existing community. Why should we turn Dummett’s argument on its head? What he calls a social version of Frege’s theory is merely the causal theory with another name. Well, one differentiation that Dummett would emphasize is that, or what I have proposed, people who are long dead, who are no longer part of the existing speech community have, in the case, for example, of the famous man in the past, a special importance for determining the reference of a proper name. So, whoever gave the name Giuseppe to Peano, and probably knew a lot more things about Peano than I, is indeed an expert. In that sense I will concede of course the role of the experts. This is my view; it’s parents in this case. But this not what Dummett has in mind. It is supposed to be the contemporary speech community that is important. Only they are part of speech community. Anyone dead cannot count. They are dead, he has emphasized.

In discussing this we must try to avoid a special epistemic fallacy. Of course, any actual example that I will produce will depend on the existence of experts, because for me to give an example someone had better know that Peano did not really do this; if not, I don’t know that my example is correct. The important question is whether without anyone knowing it, one can meaningfully conjecture, and be right, that the contemporary popular set of properties associated with a proper name is in fact a set of common misconceptions even among the experts and that the referent did not satisfy these properties.

Once one sees this, I think one can see that Dummett’s view, taken as it is, is close to obviously false. And do we have to consult experts? Is the existence of contemporary experts and encyclopedias important for the contemporary reference of the given common name? Take the

name Peano. Imagine all the experts assembled in a hall which is then bombed. A few experts may survive; those are people who, though historians of mathematics, have somehow not studied a lot about Peano and have picked up the common misconception. The others are gone. They are dead. The existing speech community then consists entirely of people who have the misconception. On the theory in question, taken as it is, the reference suffers a dramatic shift. Before the bombing it was Peano, after the bombing it was Dedekind. But this I think is not the case. And why isn't the case? It's because of what I have emphasized before: that normally we think of the relevant semantic features as preserved. This is the essence of the historical theory. A speaker at any given time over time, and even if he has forgotten most of the descriptions he associates with the name of the being, or even he may be an amnesiac, still counts normally as preserving the same reference that he had before. And this is even the case here and it is the case when the name is transmitted.

Just the simple example which I could have elaborated given more time shows, I think, the fallacy of any assumption that a contemporary group of experts is crucial for determining the reference of proper names. I also think, though I can only say this by title, that those who have advocated it have not seen that we can be just as erroneous about who the experts are. And the experts may even themselves have false conceptions or they may not be the proper appropriate class of experts. We can be just as wrong about these things as we can be wrong about the properties of the man himself; but I can't elaborate on this here. It is another difficulty of giving experts any special semantic powers. There is no special linguistic role to be given to any special substratum of the community. The community can in fact have a completely prevailing erroneous misconception either about a natural kind term or about a proper name provided the appropriate historical connections exist. Any suggestion that some special subclasses of theory are going to save the situation is, I think, wrong.