

Meta-linguistic Descriptivism and the Opacity of Quotation

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Abstract The paper unfolds a non-modal problem for (moderate) meta-linguistic descriptivism, the thesis that the meaning of a proper name (e.g. ‘Aristotle’) is given by a meta-linguistic description of a certain type (e.g. ‘the bearer of “Aristotle”’). According to this theory, if $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$ is a proper name, it is a sufficient condition for the name’s being significant that the description \ulcorner the bearer of $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner \urcorner$ is significant. However, a quotational expression may be significant even when the expression quoted is not. Therefore, proper names and their corresponding descriptions cannot be synonymous, and the corresponding descriptions cannot be viewed as giving the meanings of proper names. So, even if it was immune to Kripke-style modal criticisms, moderate meta-linguistic descriptivism would still seem to founder on the rocks of the opacity of quotation.

Keywords Descriptivism · Quotation · Descriptions · Proper names · Kripke

1 Introduction

After Saul Kripke’s forceful attack in *Naming and Necessity* (Kripke 1980), descriptivism, the view that for every proper name there is a description giving the meaning of that name, was written off by many theorists. Over the years, however, descriptivism has proven more robust than expected. Writers like Jerrold Katz (Katz 1990; 1994), Kent Bach (Bach 1987), Bart Geurts (Geurts 1997), Michael Nelson (Nelson 2002), and Claudio Costa (Costa 2011) have defended variants of it in new and original ways. The process of repeated criticism and defence has even been described as a process of natural selection:

It is widely believed that the description theory of names has been refuted. [...] The fact that recent criticisms, particularly Kripke’s, do refute the most popular versions of the theory has led many philosophers to conclude that all plausible

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versions have been eliminated, leaving only those not worth bothering about. I want to show that, to the contrary, this criticism has served as a winnowing process, leaving the one plausible version of the theory. (Katz 1990, 31)

In addition, some important presuppositions of anti-descriptivist arguments have been disputed. For instance, Bach has claimed that criticisms based on the modal nature of proper names fail to constitute objections to descriptivism since the underlying intuitions ‘have been misdescribed as semantic and are properly understood as implicitly pragmatic’ (Bach 1987, 168). More recently, other theorists have advanced arguments that criticise modal counterarguments against descriptivism (Oliva Córdoba 2002a; Oliva Córdoba 2002b; Baumann 2010).

Although some recent defences of descriptivism have been called into doubt (Everett 2005), the case against descriptivism seems still to have weakened. This paper will aim to strengthen it again by addressing what has been regarded as the ‘winner’ of the process of natural selection or the one plausible version of descriptivism: meta-linguistic descriptivism. My argument against this theory will not make use of the controversial assumptions about the modal nature of reference on which Kripke’s modal argument relies. The considerations put forward below centre around the observation that meta-linguistic descriptivism appears to be incompatible with what seems to be an important feature of quotation: namely, that a quotational expression may be significant even if the expression embedded in it is not. In opposition to this claim, the theory discussed seems committed to the claim that if a description like $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$ the bearer of $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$ is significant, then so is $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$. However, this is both counterintuitive and theoretically implausible, and thus the theory under examination is problematic.

I have indicated what I mean when I talk about descriptivist theories (of proper names). For the sake of clarity, however, let us be more explicit and call a theory of proper names descriptivist if and only if it claims that the meaning of proper names is such that if $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$ is a proper name there is a (definite) description $\ulcorner \beta \urcorner$ such that it gives the meaning of $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$ (Nelson 2002, 408). So, $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$ and $\ulcorner \beta \urcorner$ are taken to be synonymous, but there must be more to the descriptivist claim. Remember that synonymy is symmetrical, but the relation the descriptivist has in mind cannot be. The descriptivist claim is thought to bring out the real nature of proper names, to uncover their true semantics, so it must be understood in terms of an asymmetrical relation. It cannot be correct to say that the meaning of the description is, in turn, given by the proper name. So, ‘giving the meaning’ must be understood, roughly, in terms of being synonymous and explanatorily more fundamental. That is how I will understand descriptivist theories here.

As indicated above, I will focus on one type of (name-theoretic) descriptivism and will make no claim to rule out other variants of the position. What I shall present is a simple yet novel argument posing a problem for meta-linguistic descriptivism in general and apply it to moderate meta-linguistic descriptivism in particular. Again, clarity is called for. As I use the term, in order to be meta-linguistic, a theory must assign a theoretically essential role to an element that is about a linguistic object. Meta-linguistic descriptivism, as envisaged by those who introduced or discussed it as a way out for descriptivism, does just that. It argues that we give the meaning of proper names by descriptions quoting them. At the same time, proponents of meta-linguistic descriptivism tried to construe it as a moderate theory. They wanted to make the meaning-giving descriptions as theoretically undemanding as possible. I shall

conclude that despite these efforts to make descriptivism as plausible as can be, and even if, as many descriptivists seem to assume, Kripke-style modal criticisms could be met, there is good reason to be sceptical about descriptivism even in its most moderate form.¹

This conclusion may seem somewhat perplexing, since elsewhere I have made claims akin to Bach's reply to the Kripkean charges (Oliva Córdoba 2002b). However, my sympathies are to the spirit rather than to the letter of meta-linguistic descriptivism, and in this paper I set out to criticise the latter while confining myself to but a few closing remarks about the former. The point I want to make is mainly critical: even assuming that descriptivism can be defended against Kripkean modal counter-arguments, there is still a problem for its strongest variant: meta-linguistic descriptivism. The aim of this paper is bring out exactly what that problem consists in.

2 Criticising Some Varieties of Descriptivism

Prior to *Naming and Necessity*, philosophers dealing with the theory of proper names often assumed some sort of descriptivist view. Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, and John Searle are usually all regarded as proponents of different variants of descriptivism. As mentioned above, descriptivist views have lost much of their appeal in light of Kripke's criticisms. But as the meta-linguist descriptivist hopes to improve upon these views, it is perhaps useful to briefly recapitulate some (non-modal) points against the views associated with these thinkers.

First, it simply seems implausible to assume that a proper name like (A) means neither more nor less than a description like, say, (B):

- (A) Aristotle
- (B) The teacher of Alexander the Great

The reason is that even if you know the meaning of the name it can come as news to you that Aristotle was, in fact, the teacher of Alexander the Great. Hence (1) and (2)

- (1) Aristotle is Aristotle
- (2) Aristotle is the teacher of Alexander the Great

¹ Contrary to what the label might suggest, Costa's 'meta-descriptivist theory of proper names' (Costa 2011) is not a moderate meta-linguistic descriptivist theory in the sense discussed here, and as such, it shall not concern us. First, it is not moderate: It is theoretically demanding in that it offers a whole variety of descriptions that must be satisfied in order to 'allow the application' of a proper name; Costa's concern is to identify a structure among those descriptions; his point is to distinguish between localizing descriptions (giving 'the spatio-temporal location and career of the object') and characterizing descriptions (giving 'what are considered the most relevant properties of the object'). Moreover, it is not meta-linguistic in the way the theory discussed in this paper is: Neither the 'correct' localizing descriptions nor the corresponding characterizing descriptions quote the proper name they are thought to 'allow the application' of. Finally, it is not descriptivist: Descriptivists ask what the meaning of a proper name is. Costa frankly admits that his central contribution (misleadingly termed 'meta-descriptivist rule'), as he puts it, 'cannot express the relevant meaning of a proper name' (Costa 2011, 271). Thus, the merits of Costa's approach may be seen elsewhere; they do not touch upon the topic of the present paper.

are not cognitively equivalent. Here, talk of cognitive equivalence is to be understood along the lines suggested in the opening passage of Frege's 'Sense and reference' (Frege 1892). Frege argues that sentences like (1) and (2) have different *Erkenntniswert*—they are not cognitively equivalent—his criterion being that you can hold the one to be true without holding the other to be true or vice versa (Frege 1892, 215). And since for Frege cognitive equivalence is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for synonymy (having the same sense),² the name 'Aristotle' is not synonymous with the description 'the teacher of Alexander the Great'. Such a line of thought appears to rule out the first type of descriptivism, the simple descriptivist view.

However, we seem to fare no better when we resort to the more sophisticated alternative called the 'bundle theory' of proper names, defended by Searle. Searle's move consists of claiming that a proper name like (A) means neither more nor less than a description like (Γ)

(A) Aristotle

(Γ) The F

for some appropriate 'F' to be substituted by a predicate representing the 'logical sum, inclusive disjunction, of properties commonly attributed to [Aristotle]' (Searle 1958, 171). But again, even if you know the meaning of the name 'Aristotle' it might well come as news to you that Aristotle has any one of the properties commonly attributed to him. Imagine a staunch dissenter, Paul, convinced that Aristotle has none of the properties commonly attributed to him. Does it follow from this fact that he does not know the meaning of 'Aristotle'? It does not seem so. We may even go further, assuming, for the sake of argument, that Paul does associate the name with a different meaning. In that case, we must ask: does it follow that Paul attaches a new meaning to the name when he gradually comes to believe that Aristotle exemplifies some, or all, of the properties commonly attributed to him? This seems equally implausible. So it seems that 'Aristotle' and the description that gives a bundle of properties commonly attributed to its bearer are not cognitively equivalent. And, again, since cognitive equivalence is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for synonymy, the name 'Aristotle' is not synonymous with the bundled description. Thus we are led to conclude that the bundle theory of the meaning of proper names is in no better shape than its simplistic rival, which we ruled out above.³

3 Moderate Meta-linguistic Descriptivism

The counter-arguments presented make use of the cognitive inequivalence of proper names and their allegedly synonymous descriptions. They take issue with the descriptivist theses Kripke devotes most attention to. But what about descriptivism in general? At this stage we need take into account an even more sophisticated variant of descriptivism. This is the variant we described at the beginning of this paper as the most

² Costa seems to miss this point. He unhesitatingly identifies Fregean senses with cognitive values and informational content (Costa 2011, 271). Elsewhere, I discussed why such an identification is inadequate (Oliva Córdoba 1995).

³ This conclusion is not affected by Costa's differentiation within the class of properties associated with the referent of the name. Costa aims to improve upon Searle's bundle theory: to this end he distinguishes between localizing and characterizing descriptions (Costa 2011, 260). Still, from the fact that Paul does not accept a single one of either the localizing descriptions or the characterizing descriptions, it does not follow that Paul does not understand the name: maybe he is just mistaken, maybe he considers other properties more relevant, or maybe he does not understand the name. But this latter possibility is just one out of at least three logical possibilities.

promising variant of descriptivism advocated by theorists like Bach and Katz. It can be traced back to a suggestion made by William Kneale:

[...] even ordinary proper names of people are not, as John Stuart Mill supposed, signs without sense[.] While it may be informative to tell a man that the most famous Greek philosopher was called Socrates, it is obviously trifling to tell him that Socrates was called Socrates; and the reason is simply that he cannot understand your use of the word 'Socrates' at the beginning of your statement unless he already knows that it means 'the individual called Socrates'. (Kneale 1962, 629f.)

There are some peculiarities about Kneale's reference to the past tense and his use of quotes. I shall neglect these in order to rephrase his position in a more promising fashion: A proper name like (A), the suggestion goes, means neither more nor less than a description like (Δ):

- (A) Aristotle
- (Δ) The individual called 'Aristotle'

We clearly have a descriptivist position here, but it differs markedly from the variants discussed above: It is aptly called meta-linguistic because it assumes that a given proper name is synonymous with a description mentioning that very name; it can be called moderate, since, unlike its more traditional competitors, the description does not describe the person named in any really substantial or conceptually demanding way. More importantly, this form of descriptivism seems superior to both of the traditional views since, *prima facie*, we cannot dismiss it in the way we dismissed its competitors: While (A)/(B) and (A)/(Γ) were not cognitively equivalent, (A) and (Δ) seem to be more promising. Simply ask yourself: how could someone who believed what could be expressed by an instance of (3) withhold assent to what could be expressed by an instance of (4)?

- (3) α is F.
- (4) The individual called $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$ is F.

It is this difference that seems to protect moderate meta-linguistic descriptivism from the type of criticism advanced so far. Hence, we cannot say that the arguments applied so far refute name-theoretic descriptivism in general. An additional argument is needed.

4 Introducing Some Preparatory Assumptions

So, while some forms of descriptivism appear to be ruled out by considerations of the type presented above, moderate meta-linguistic descriptivism does not. However, we can still advance a critical argument against this modest form of descriptivism. In order to arrive at this argument, I must introduce two principles. Both seem more or less unproblematic, but in the interest of clarity of argumentation they should be made explicit.

The Transparency of Synonymy The first principle displays a certain air of triviality, but clearly this cannot be a disadvantage in the present context. For want of a better

expression, I shall call it the principle of the transparency of synonymy. It claims that two expressions are synonymous if and only if they have the same meaning. On the basis of this principle, we may infer that if $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$ and $\ulcorner \beta \urcorner$ are synonymous, it is not possible to grasp the meaning of $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$ without grasping the meaning of $\ulcorner \beta \urcorner$. You cannot grasp the meaning of ‘vixen’ and at the same time fail to grasp the meaning of ‘female fox’ and vice versa since the meaning of ‘vixen’ is the meaning of ‘female fox’. Of course, you might grasp the meaning of ‘vixen’ without realising that it is the meaning of that word, for example because you have never come across the word ‘vixen’ despite knowing what a fox is and that some of them are female. I will say more about the different possible senses of ‘knowing the meaning of’ shortly. For the purpose of this paper, however, let us assume that both expressions, or at least the meaning-giving description, are understood, and confine discussion to that assumption.

The Opacity of Quotation The second principle may seem a little less obvious than the first but, arguably, this is due to the complexity of embedding we confront when we consider quotational contexts. The principle rests on the observation that quotational contexts are non-extensional in a strong sense. It can be called the principle of the opacity of quotation and it states, roughly, that you can grasp the meaning of an expression containing a quoted expression without grasping the meaning of the expression quoted (I shall improve upon this formulation in a moment). Here is an example: Tom and Harry are arguing about what Galilei said when he was taken to the Court of Inquisition. Tom says:

(5) Actually, Galilei never said ‘Eppur si muove’.

Harry retorts:

(6) You told me something different yesterday!

Must we, in order to credit Harry with a grasp of the meaning of Tom’s utterance, assume that Harry speaks Italian? Not at all. Harry may well grasp the meaning of (5) without grasping the meaning of

(7) Eppur si muove

Another type of example is provided by patent nonsense expressions. Take the result of concatenating the first letter of every single one of the first eight lines of my copy of Strawson’s ‘On Referring’ (in standard typographical order): ‘Woenoeews’. Obviously, this expression is fully devoid of any meaning (in English), so whoever states (8) thereby makes a true statement:

(8) Using ‘Woenoeews’ in an English sentence rather than mentioning it results in producing nonsense.

Since (8) is true, it is surely significant. And since the expression in quotation marks is not, it is clear that it does not contribute to the meaning of the expression containing its quotation name (i.e. the sentence). The likely explanation for this fact is that the

quotation marks prevent the meaning of the expression inside them having any significant interaction with the meaning of the rest of the words in the sentence. And this in turn ensures that you can grasp the meaning of the expression containing a quoted expression without grasping the meaning of the expression quoted.

Of course, we have to safeguard ourselves against a purely contingent way in which the principle might be refuted. For obvious reasons, we must not allow that one and the same expression be both used and mentioned: sentences like

(9) Boston is populous, and ‘Boston’ is disyllabic

are not suited to explore the peculiarities of the opacity of quotation, since the desired effect concerning the quoted expression is bypassed by the presence of a token of the very same expression in transparent position. Moreover, we must not misunderstand the principle with respect to what it counts as knowing the meaning of an expression. There are two senses of knowing the meaning involved: (i) Someone’s knowing the meaning in the sense of grasping what happens to be the meaning of $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$ but not necessarily as being the meaning of $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$; this is the case illustrated when discussing the principle of synonymy. (ii) Someone’s knowing the meaning in the sense of grasping the meaning of $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$ as being the meaning of $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$; this may be illustrated by imagining that someone knows of the German word ‘tag’ that it means day. Since the principle of the opacity of quotation employs the latter sense rather than the former, it will not be refuted by examples in which an expression $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$ is mentioned, and a synonym or an explanation of that expression is used.

A particularly interesting case of quotation is the case of quotation-names, which I have not dealt with explicitly above. However, once we realise that every expression contains itself (namely as an improper part), we can easily apply the principle to this case too. The result is that you may grasp the meaning of a quotation-name without grasping the meaning of the expression quoted. Actually, this is precisely what happens to me with respect to the following pair of examples:

(E) ‘telemetry’

(Z) telemetry

I do not want to gloss over my insufficient knowledge of the vocabulary of engineering, but I think that we all encounter this kind of situation fairly frequently with technical expressions or words in foreign languages.

5 The Problem for Meta-linguistic Descriptivism

The problem for meta-linguistic descriptivism can be derived by applying the foregoing principles to the meta-linguistic descriptivist’s central thesis and to a purely structural assumption given by the very format of meta-linguistic descriptivism. We arrive at this last premise by asking ourselves what the format of the meta-linguistic description corresponding to a proper name is. There seems to be some disagreement among meta-linguistic descriptivists here. Kneale, as we have seen, opts for

(Δ) the individual called $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$

while other theorists (Katz 1990, 39; Bach 1987, 135) prefer

(Δ) the bearer of $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$.

These subtleties may be safely ignored in the present context, however, as long as we note the common feature of all meta-linguistic descriptivist theories: If $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$ is a proper name, and $\ulcorner \beta \urcorner$ is its corresponding meta-linguistic description (i.e. the meta-linguistic description claimed to give the meaning of $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$), then $\ulcorner \beta \urcorner$ is an expression containing a quotation-name of $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$. In other words: every corresponding meta-linguistic description contains an expression quoting the proper name it is said to correspond to. This is the meta-linguistic descriptivist's structural assumption. (For brevity's sake I shall henceforth drop the qualification 'meta-linguistic' where this is unlikely to lead to confusion.)

Neither for itself nor taken together with the two principles detailed above does the structural assumption constitute a problem. However, as soon as we add the main thesis of meta-linguistic descriptivism as a fourth commitment, we seem to be in trouble. This is most easily shown with the help of an example:

- (A) Aristotle
 (Δ) The bearer of 'Aristotle'
 Applied to this example the main thesis yields

(C1) 'Aristotle' is synonymous with 'the bearer of "Aristotle"'.
 (C2) 'The bearer of "Aristotle"' is an expression containing a quotation-name of 'Aristotle'.

If we then apply the descriptivist's structural assumption we get:

(C2) 'The bearer of "Aristotle"' is an expression containing a quotation-name of 'Aristotle'.

Now, on the basis of the principle of the opacity of quotation, we can infer from (C2) that you can know the meaning of 'the bearer of "Aristotle"' without knowing the meaning of 'Aristotle'—you may know of the one expression what it means without knowing it of the other. Next, by using the structural assumption and the principle of the opacity of quotation, we may derive that

(C3) It is possible to know the meaning of 'the bearer of "Aristotle"' without knowing the meaning of 'Aristotle'.

However, if we apply the principle of the transparency of synonymy to (C1), we get

(C4) It is not the case that it is possible to know the meaning of 'the bearer of "Aristotle"' without knowing the meaning of 'Aristotle'.

At this stage, the problem becomes apparent. For now we may derive on the basis of all four commitments:

(C5) It is possible to know the meaning of 'the bearer of "Aristotle"' without knowing the meaning of 'Aristotle'

and

it is not the case that it is possible to know the meaning of 'the bearer of "Aristotle"' without knowing the meaning of 'Aristotle'.

And this seems quite unpalatable.

Of course, (C5) does not express a plain contradiction. The principle of the transparency of synonymy and the principle of the opacity of quotation employ different senses of ‘knowing the meaning’. In consequence, different senses of ‘knowing the meaning’ are also employed in (C3) and (C4). Thus, in our conclusion, (C5), the second conjunct does not express the strict negation of the first. However, the descriptivist is also committed to a variant of (C4) in which talk of knowing an expression is employed in the very same sense in which it is used in (C3). Why is that? Remember that the sense in which it was originally employed in (C3) is the sense of knowing the meaning of $\neg \alpha \neg$ as being the meaning of $\neg \alpha \neg$. So a piece of knowledge concerning that expression is essentially involved. Applying that to (C4) yields: you cannot know of the description what meaning it has without knowing the meaning of the name. The descriptivist is committed to this view because he assumes that the description gives the meaning of the name: It is explanatorily more fundamental; it explains the meaning of the name it presents. Because it presents it, in this respect, you cannot understand the description and yet fail to note that it is about the name.⁴ Understanding the meaning-giving description is constitutive of understanding the name, so—a *fortiori*—it is sufficient for understanding the meaning of the name. Now, of course, you can fail to understand the description. But the descriptivist would still have to assume that once you did understand the description properly you would instantly have to realise that it invests the name with meaning. Thus it is the strength of his own claim that commits the descriptivist to a variant of (C4) in which talk of knowing an expression is employed in the very same sense in which it is used in (C3). And as he is, along with us, committed to (C3) for independent reasons, he is ultimately committed to (C6), the conjunction of (C3) and (C4) in a reading under which it is a plain contradiction:

- (C6) It is not the case that it is possible to know the meaning of ‘the bearer of “Aristotle”’ without knowing the meaning of ‘Aristotle’
and
it is possible to know the meaning of ‘the bearer of “Aristotle”’ without knowing the meaning of ‘Aristotle’.

Let me frame the problem in a slightly different way. Among other things, the descriptivist’s main assumption tells us that the description’s being significant is sufficient for the embedded expression’s being significant. (This is a necessary condition for the synonymy of the expressions in question, so it follows from (C1).) This is the (allegedly) meaning-giving connection. But now recall the ‘Woenews’ case and apply it to the case in question. In the present context, it is hard to dispute that the description

- (10) The bearer of ‘Woenews’

is significant. Would it not even be true to say ‘There is no bearer of “Woenews” since “Woenews” is not significant’? By contrast, on the very assumption made on its introduction, the expression

- (11) Woenews

⁴ For the notion of presentation cf. Valberg and Künne (Valberg 1970, 131; Künne 1983, 178).

is fully devoid of meaning. Therefore, the significance of a meta-linguistic description like (10) is not sufficient for (11) being significant. But how could this be, if the descriptivist is right in that it is the meaning-giving connection?

Of course, the descriptivist could protest that, while ‘Woenoeews’ is an expression, it is not a proper name, and thus the result arrived at is irrelevant for the case he makes. But will this objection really help? There are reasons for doubt.

First, if the idea of a proper name that lacks significance is not simply bizarre, the descriptivist has not yet managed to ward off danger. For it is the insignificance of (11) and the significance of (10) which prevent the significance of (10) from being a sufficient condition for the significance of (11). And if there are proper names that lack significance, we can choose a proper name of this kind as a substitute for (11), thus forcing the descriptivist to withdraw his objection. So we are driven to consider the question of whether there are proper names that lack significance. Are there? Frankly, I do not have a fixed opinion about the matter. But it is common to admit that there are proper sentences that lack significance, and some theorists might even be prepared to admit that there are proper predicates that lack significance (like ‘galumph’ from Lewis Carroll’s poem ‘Jabberwocky’). So why should we reject the idea that there are insignificant proper names? In any case, it will not count in favour of moderate meta-linguistic descriptivism that to subscribe to this view, one must give up the idea that there are insignificant names.

Second, that the significance of (10) is not sufficient for the significance of (11) seems just to be a particular instance of a phenomenon that results from the peculiarities of quotation in general. Therefore, it is simply ad hoc to insist that the meaning-giving connection nevertheless holds if the expression embedded is of a particular type (i.e. a proper name) and the expression embedding it is also of a certain type (i.e. a description quoting the proper name). So if the descriptivist really wanted to make this case, he would have to provide an independent reason to assume that the inference holds for proper names while it fails for expressions that are not proper names. And, of course, the independent reason cannot consist of the assumption to be defended, namely the descriptivist’s claim that proper names are synonymous with their corresponding meta-linguistic descriptions.

Finally, should we not protest in turn that the descriptivist’s objection is irrelevant in the first place? For it seems that it is just the semantics of quotation marks that makes them capture any expression they enclose behind some sort of semantic iron curtain such that they hinder the expression enclosed from contributing to the semantic content of the expression in which it is mentioned. And what reason is there to assume that the semantics of quotation marks changes as soon as the expression enclosed is a proper name? Without an answer to this question, we may suppose that it was irrelevant to point out that the expression inserted in (10) was not a proper name. What the example illustrated was that no expression, of any kind whatsoever, is synonymous with a meta-linguistic description in which it is mentioned. Let us, for a moment, think of quotational contexts with the help of the container/content metaphor. Then we can say: quotational contexts are semantically opaque because of features of the container not because of any features of anything you might fill in.

Against this background, the impression that something is seriously amiss with the conclusion we arrived at cannot simply be wiped out. Hence, we are left with (C6) which, as we saw, is a genuine contradiction. As with every contradiction, there is no

preference on formal grounds alone as to which assumption is to be dismissed. However, in the light of the considerations presented there is a likely candidate: the descriptivist's main assumption.

Could the descriptivist escape this conclusion by replacing the meaning-relation of synonymy with a weaker relation? Insistence on talk of 'semantic equivalence' (Bach 1987, 135) instead of synonymy may suggest this. However, from the very way in which the argument is presented, we see that it is unlikely that the descriptivist can escape the conclusion drawn if the ersatz relation is an equivalence relation. The descriptivist seems to face an unsolvable dilemma: either his ersatz relation is not an equivalence relation, in which case it will be too weak to lay claim to bringing out the meaning of proper names; or his ersatz relation is an equivalence relation, in which case his position is susceptible to the very same kind of criticism.

Is there perhaps another way in which the problem could be avoided? There is one strategy often thought to answer charges of the kind put forward here. Sometimes, it is claimed that proper names are 'not really lexical items of language at all', and it might be thought that this idea somehow provides a basis for escaping the criticism advanced above. Let me briefly point out why this is not the case. On one hand, the strategy invites the immediate reply that only expressions that are really 'part of the language' seem capable of being synonymous (or semantically equivalent). Therefore, it seems that applying this strategy, far from strengthening his case, makes things even worse for the descriptivist. In addition, the case of an expression not being a lexical item of language has already been considered: it was demonstrated that, even in the 'Woenoevs' case, this expression cannot be regarded as being synonymous or semantically equivalent with a description mentioning it. And is 'Woenoevs' not a perfectly good example of an expression that is not really a lexical item of language at all? All that is required in order to mount the criticism advanced, with respect to a certain type of expression, is that it be an expression (in particular, that it be capable of being quoted). And as long as the descriptivist is prepared to admit that proper names can be quoted, it is simply irrelevant whether he regards them as fully-fledged lexical items of language or not.

However, it might be thought that there is, after all, a last ray of hope for the descriptivist.⁵ Did Quine not show in his 'Reference and modality' that sometimes expressions in quotation marks do contribute to the truth conditions of expressions quoting them? Quine presents the following examples:

- (12) 'Giorgione played chess' is true
- (13) 'Giorgione' named a chess player
- (14) Giogione played chess.

He then offers the following commentary:

Our criterion of referential occurrence makes this occurrence of the name 'Giorgone' in [14] referential, and must make the occurrence of 'Giorgone' in [12] and [13] referential by the same token, despite the presence of single quotes in [12] and [13]. The point about quotation is not that it must destroy referential

⁵ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this point.

occurrence, but that it can (and ordinarily does) destroy referential occurrence. The examples [12] and [13] are exceptional in that the special predicates ‘is true’ and ‘named’ have the effect of undoing the single quotes—as is evident on comparison of [12] and [13] with [14]. (Quine 1953, 141; *numbering adapted*)

On closer reflection, however, it becomes clear that Quine should have been more cautious, at least with regard to the one type of example the descriptivist might draw hope from, i.e. examples analogous to (13). The criterion Quine alludes to makes use of what he calls the principle of substitutivity: ‘Given a true statement of identity, one of its two terms may be substituted for the other in any true statement, and the result will be true’ (Quine 1953, 139). If the principle applies to a given term in a given context, its occurrence in that context is referential; otherwise it is not. But now let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the guy over there was Giorgone, and that he played chess. Given the context, then, two statements are justified:

- (15) The guy over there played chess
 (16) He played chess.

These statements merely result from substituting co-referential terms for ‘Giorgone’ in (14). They are true, so the principle of substitutivity was applicable to ‘Giorgone’, and the occurrence of ‘Giorgone’ in (14) is referential. Contrary to what Quine says, however, we can easily see that the occurrence of ‘Giorgone’ in (13) is not referential. Substituting accordingly in (13) yields

- (17) ‘The guy over there’ named a chess player
 (18) ‘He’ named a chess player.

Here, substitution was not truth-preserving. So, the occurrence of ‘Giorgone’ in (13) was not referential, and the principle of substitutivity must not be applied to contexts of the type ‘... names ...’.⁶ Most importantly, however, we must not conclude that the special predicate ‘named’ has the force of undoing the single quotes—as is evident on comparison of (13) with (17) and (18). (Whether at least the special predicate ‘is true’ has that force is a controversial issue concerning the redundancy theory of truth. It is not at all clear, though, that it actually has any bearing on the sort of descriptivism targeted here.) So, ultimately, the descriptivist gains no escape route from Quine.

Let us take stock. Against the descriptivist, proper names are not synonymous with their corresponding meta-linguistic descriptions. Meta-linguistic descriptions do not give the meaning of proper names. Our argumentation was by its very nature completely independent of Kripke’s modal considerations. So, however, immune to Kripke’s modal criticisms, even the ‘only plausible version’ of descriptivism fails. Meta-linguistic descriptivism founders on the rocks of the opacity of quotation.

⁶ Actually, this has bearing on the discussion of the cognitive equivalence of (3) and (4) too: Despite appearances, the claim that (3) and (4) are cognitively equivalent can only hope to get off the ground if substitution is confined to proper names. So, with regard to this, meta-linguistic descriptivism is not really better off than either simple or cluster-theoretic descriptivism.

6 A Glimpse Beyond

This concludes my discussion of meta-linguistic descriptivism. However, there is one more thing I should like to sketch, namely my reasons for still being sympathetic to the spirit of the meta-linguistic descriptivist position. I am impressed by some facts concerning natural language proper names that seem to impress meta-linguistic descriptivists too. These facts are so strikingly fundamental and yet are sadly neglected by so many other theorists. Let me confine myself here to one issue only. It seems too obvious to mention that virtually, every name has more than one bearer. Just think of names like ‘John Smith’, ‘Aristotle’, ‘Hamburg’ and, perhaps, ‘Horse and Groom’. Many people are called ‘John Smith’, at least two people (a philosopher and a shipping magnate) are called ‘Aristotle’, more than ten cities are called ‘Hamburg’ in the United States alone, and so many public houses in the United Kingdom are called ‘Horse and Groom’. Of course, there are names with no bearer and names with only one bearer as well. But when we look at empty names (like ‘Atlantis’) and names with only one bearer (like ‘Jehovah’), it seems that they are the exceptions proving the rule. So the vast majority of natural language proper names are shared names. No doubt, this is an empirical fact. Still, it is a fact. We should do well to take it into account in our attempts to contribute to the semantics of natural language.

Unfortunately, however, this innocent fact seems to come into conflict with the dominant view that proper names are rigid designators. Taking the phenomenon of shared names seriously, if rigid designators are expressions that designate the same object with respect to all possible worlds, we seem to face two options: either it is not the case that proper names are rigid designators, or we must choose to ignore all other bearers of a given proper name $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$ in order to make sense of the claim that $\ulcorner \alpha \urcorner$ is a rigid designator in the first place. By such a move, we would effectively individuate proper names by their uses, one for every bearer. The proponent of the rigidity claim would, perhaps, justify this move as mere convenience for theoretical purposes: ‘I spoke for simplicity as if each name had a unique bearer’ (Kripke 1980, 7; emphasis added). However, the idea that such an option comes close to a methodological *petitio principii* worries some descriptivists. As Kent Bach puts it:

By this method, a name has as many uses as it has bearers. No wonder that a name, as used in a particular way, rigidly designates! (Bach 1987, 154)

Now, it is clear that meta-linguistic descriptivism does not have any problems accounting for the fact of shared names. It would just have to assume that descriptions like ‘the bearer of “John Smith”’ are incomplete descriptions (like, for example ‘the table’) that may be used on different occasions to make reference to different objects (Oliva Córdoba 2002a; Bach 1987, 136). And this is a very natural assumption indeed. By contrast, the Kripkean has to tell a long story in order to account for the fact of shared names and hold fast to his rigidity claim. Of course, this is not to suggest that the story cannot be told; the defender of the rigidity claim need not lay down arms so quickly. Remember that in these closing remarks, I am only concerned with explaining why I am sympathetic to the spirit of meta-linguistic descriptivism even if I doubt that it can escape the difficulties detected. What I have attempted in this paper is, in a sense, to steer a middle course. I have presented a counter-argument to meta-linguistic

descriptivism that does not rely on the Kripkean rigidity claim—precisely because I have doubts here too.⁷ Obviously, suggesting an alternative to both meta-linguistic descriptivism and the rigidity claim calls for an elaborate explanation and a clever defence. I am happy to leave this for another occasion.^{8, 9}

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⁷ See Oliva Córdoba (2002a and 2002b) where the rigidity argument is critically reviewed. Baumann (2010) also raises interesting questions to this effect.

⁸ Cf. Oliva Córdoba (2002a), ch.5, where such an alternative is developed.

⁹ This paper has been long in the making. A predecessor was presented at the second Barcelona–Hamburg meeting, February 2000. I thank the audience, in particular Manuel García-Carpintero, for discussion and helpful criticism. For the ultimate version I am indebted to Nathan Wildman, Ben Hofer and to an anonymous referee for valuable suggestions.