

In Search of the Third Way: Probability Distributions as Semantic Values of Proper Names

There is a clear sense in which the proper name of an organization in the subject position of the sentence-type (1) “NSZZ ‘Solidarność’ was founded in 1980.” intuitively refers to that very organization (and nothing else) even without any help from the information potentially provided by the context of its utterance.

On the other hand, the proper name in the sentence-type (2) “John is tall.” intuitively does not refer to anyone in particular, at least as long as the sentence is not paired with some context that would allow for the determination of a concrete referent. In other words, the name in this sentence-type can be said, at best, to refer to some John (or to some bearer of the name “John”) to be further specified by the context.

This singularity-generalty duality in the behavior of proper names poses problems for some major views regarding the semantics of these expressions. For example, the classic versions of both descriptivist and direct referentialist views support a homonymy approach to names according to which all Johns bear different names that only happen to look and sound the same (according to descriptivism, those different names are individuated by their accompanied definite descriptions, and according to referentialism, the individuation is provided by separate causal chains). But this means that the views in question cannot explain the intuition raised by (2), as they have to claim that at the sentence-type level, it is already settled which John’s name is involved.

But things get even more complicated than the combination of (1) and (2) suggests. That is because many names raise something close to singularity intuitions even though there (might) exist multiple bearers of them (supposedly contrary to the name involved in (1) which arguably possesses only a single bearer). Think of the sentence-type (3): “Michael Jordan is tall.” The basketball player who bears the mentioned name is the natural candidate for the referent of that name as involved in (3), even though he is definitely not the only bearer of that name. In other words, it seems that the intuition regarding the definiteness of reference of the name in (3) is somewhere in between the complete singularity of the name in (1) and the generality in (2) (and arguably ‘closer’ to that of (1)).

The observation about the existence of the “in between” intuitions can be boosted by the following progression:

(4) Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

(5) Georg Hegel

(6) Hegel

(7) Georg.

When it comes to the intuitions regarding singularity-generalality of the names (4)-(7), it is quite clear that the latter ones enjoy more generality than the earlier ones. (4) is perhaps perfectly singular (assuming there is no bearer of that name other than the German philosopher) but (6) and (7) are definitely general (similarly to the name in (2)). (5), on the other hand, lies somewhere in between: it is clear that there might be more than one bearer of “Georg Hegel” but most sentence-types of the form “Georg Hegel is F” will supposedly raise intuitions to the effect that it is the German philosopher that is referred to (even though sometimes he might not end up to be).

This “in between” intuition remains without (at least semantic) explanation from the further group of views on the semantics of proper names. Predicativism, i.e. the view which treats names as predicates and thinks that their referential uses involve the covert addition of determiners such as “that” or “the”, finds the tools only for accommodating the singularity intuitions raised by (1) (thanks to the mentioned determiners), and by (2) (thanks to the fact that before the name is paired with a context, every bearer of the name is an equally good candidate for being the referent specified by that context). The case is very similar with the views that analyze proper names as indexicals, and also with polyreferentialism (i.e. the view that a sentence-type of the form “N is F” expresses separate propositions ascribing the property F to each bearer of “N”, i.e. it expresses as many propositions as there is bearers of “N” and each of them is about one of these bearers).

In my talk, I shall attempt to provide a semantics of proper names that can naturally explain all three above intuitions from the singularity-generalality spectrum (including the “in between” intuition). The main thought behind my idea is that the semantic values of proper names are probability distributions whose properties depend on the frequency distributions of how often particular names are used to refer to each of their bearers.

The second aim of my talk will be to present some non-committal thoughts about the problem of analyzing the notion of “being the bearer of a name”.