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PREVIEW

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NAME, MEANING AND MEANINGFULNESS

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Philosophy

by

Jiaying Chen

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of the Requirements
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ABSTRACT

The central question of this dissertation is whether names have meaning. I approach the problem of meaning along the thought that words represent the ways in which reality is meaningfully decomposed so that it can be articulated as compositions of a limited number of elementary segments. The meaning of a word is then connected with the meaningfulness of having a thing, or a group of things or phenomena as an elementary unit, designated by the word, in our understanding and articulating reality. Why is reality so decomposed and not otherwise, and why is this piece of reality instead of another taken to be as an elementary unit? An answer to these questions leads to the insight that the meaning of a word is related to the meaningfulness of having it in the language. To look for reasons for the being of a word presupposes that there are reasons to have a word as it is in a given language, although it does not imply that we must have the word as it is. A language may have a word indicating a concept that is not indicated by any single word in another language. However, in a great many cases, reality, should it be decomposed, will be decomposed in very obvious ways. A dog, not half a dog, is universally regarded as a unit. Horses, not black horses and yellow dogs, are regarded as a class. The justification for having words to designate these kinds of units is obvious and sufficient; no unique reasons are involved. A word that designates such a unit is what we call a "name." The reason for Bush to be designated by a single word, "Bush," is the same for Reagan or

Hussein to be designated by a single word, and, consequently, no unique meaningfulness is coded in the name "Bush." Therefore, "Bush" does not have a unique meaning like a concept word such as "game" or "health," although it has a unique referent. And this is why, to borrow Ziff's expression, while names do not have meaning, they have meaning.

According to this understanding of word meaning, I conclude that the reason why we do not talk about the meaning of a name is not that there is no necessary association of the name with a definite description of its bearer, but that the reason required for regarding the bearer as an elementary unit is not a unique reason.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

What is a name? Does a name have meaning? These and similar questions have not been adequately answered.

No other word group is simpler than names, and simplistic reflections on word meaning often base themselves on the paradigm of naming. Such reflections are exemplified by referential theory,¹ which, assuming that words in the main are names, identifies the meaning of a word with what it refers to or denotes.

An innocent paragraph in Augustine's Confessions is often quoted as representative of the theory:

When they (my elders) named any thing, and as they spoke turned toward it, I saw and remembered that they called what they would point out by the name they uttered. And that they meant this thing and no other was plain from the motion of their body ... (Augustine, p.8)

Augustine nowhere develops a theory of meaning, but the paragraph quoted indeed reflects a common understanding of how words have their meaning.

John Stuart Mill was the first to offer a full-blown theory of meaning within the framework of referential theory. In his work A System of Logic, Mill considers words mainly to be names. Phrases are regarded as "many-worded names." The meaning of a word or a sentence is what it refers to. However, Mill does not count words like "is," "not," "of," "the" as names and sometimes he is even more stringent and

¹ The referential theory of meaning is also called the "denotative" or "entitative" theory of meaning.

excludes even adverbs and adjectives from the category of names. The function of the non-names is to connect names. The fact that non-names also have meaning though they do not denote is acknowledged by Mill but not elaborated.

Mill is aware that his theory of the meaning of words is at odds with how "meaning" is ordinarily understood, and is entangled in some serious difficulties. To meet some of the difficulties, he draws a distinction between connotation and denotation, not unlike the one Frege later draws between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*. According to Mill, most names denote things, but they also connote the attributes of those things. In denotation, we are concerned with the question of "which"; in connotation, with the questions "how" and "what." Meaning is ordinarily understood as connotation rather than denotation. Proper names, though, only denote; they do not connote.

The central line of the referential theory was followed by major philosophers in one way or another for a long period of time. The views on meaning that the British empiricists held also belong to such a theory, although they emphasize that it is ideas instead of things that are denoted or referred to by words and expressions. In this century, however, more and more philosophers have abandoned the referential theory. In fact, no philosopher today would insist on any crude version of it. Many philosophers now look for the meaning of a word in its relations to other words and to the sentences in which it appears, and not in the thing it denotes, if it denotes at all. The new approach avoids many difficulties the referential theory has to face and works

much better with words such as "to know," "identity," "even," "when." Paradoxically, it finds itself puzzled by the simplest words, the names. The understanding and use of a name do not very much depend on context, and apparently a name can be learned merely by associating it with what it denotes. These and similar facts have led to the conclusion that names have no meaning. But even if this conclusion is correct, we would still like to know why there is such a word group which behaves so differently. Whether taken to be the paradigm of having meaning or regarded as having no meaning at all or even denied as words of the language (Ziff, see Kripke, 1980, p.33), names have been suggested to possess a unique character. That uniqueness is what this essay sets out to examine.

I first clarify the notion of "name." One way to do this is to define names in contrast to what we call "concept word" or "concept." I therefore begin with a discussion on common names; since both common names and concept words are often treated as one category under the heading "general terms." In sections 1, 2, and 3 of Chapter 2, an attempt is made to characterize common names by way of a discussion on the notions of "similarity" and "basic level category." This discussion results in the distinction, drawn and explained in sections 4 and 5, of three types of classes: "expedient classes," "formal classes," and "substantive classes." There it is established that common names are the terms representing substantive classes, with "natural kinds" as the prototype. In the last part of the chapter, sections 6, 7, and 8 three major approaches to the problem of of meaning, semantic feature

analysis, standard definition of general terms, and the Meaning-as-Use doctrine, are introduced, only to demonstrate that common names must be treated as a particular group among general terms. It is also suggested here that the meaning of a word cannot be a bundle of semantic features, less a bundle of descriptions of the thing designated by the word.

After I have distinguished common names from other general terms, Chapter 3 goes on to examine alleged differences between common names and proper names. It reaches the conclusion that, in the discussion of how a word is related to what it designates, the distinction between a proper name and a common name is not as significant as the distinction between a name and a non-name.

Then names as a single category are contrasted with concept words with the help of the notion "ostensive learning" and the notion of "base category." Given its neat taxonomic locus, a name can be conveniently learned by ostension. But we will also account for the ostensive learning of concepts. One learns what "color" means by learning particular colors. Learning a concept word by its use can also be viewed as an extension of ostensive learning. However, each new concept word has to be learned, via ostension or not, by constructing a unique cognitive schema. On the other hand, learning a name presupposes the knowledge of a base category. "Red" is not the name of a this; it is the name of this color. "Dog" is not the name of this class; it is the name of this kind of animal. The base categories "color" and "animal" tell us how a "this" is determined.

Chapter 4 pulls together the questions and clues for answering these questions unfolded in the previous chapters. I will show that the relation between stipulated synonyms is purely linguistic while the relation between that which refers and that which is referred to always involves an extralinguistic element. After these clarifications, we will examine in detail a theme debated among Russell, Kripke, Dummett and Linsky: the relation between a name and the descriptions of the named. The theme often takes the form of two questions: "How is the reference of a name to be fixed?" and "Do names have meaning?" It is often assumed that if a name is necessarily associated with a definite description, which no one denies has meaning, then the name must also have meaning. After a careful examination of the relevant issues, however, I come to the conclusion that the association of a name with a description does not endow the name with meaning. It is not by a linguistic endeavor that we find out what a name is the name of. Neither is it to find out that a thing is so named here but otherwise named elsewhere. That Hesperus is phosphorus is an astronomic discovery, having nothing to do with "meaning" of names. We may identify a man now in the street as the same man we saw in the police station yesterday, without caring what name he has. At this point I summarize my understanding of the meaning of a word with regard to its designation. I maintain that the meaning of a word is not what it designates, but why it designates the way as it does. Thus we have connected the meaning of a word with the meaningfulness of having the word in a language. There are reasons for regarding a certain thing,

or a certain group of things or phenomena as an elementary unit in our conceiving and articulating the world and, consequently, having a particular word to designate it. Obviously, there usually are good reasons for regarding the things to which we give names as elementary units. According to this understanding of word meaning, I explain that if we do not usually talk about the meaning of a name, it is not that a name is not necessarily associated with a definite description, but because the reasons for which we regard the thing named as an elementary unit are not unique reasons. In the last section of this chapter we will discuss in what cases some words are used as names as well as concepts.

Chapter 5 examines our theory of naming through a discussion of the problem of private language. After introducing briefly a debate between Wittgenstein and Ayer on the problem, I will try to establish the thesis that language is not "invented," just as communication and understanding also are not. I shall develop this thesis through a discussion of the relation between a sentence and the words contained in the sentence. "Meaning" is a term applied both to linguistic and non-linguistic signs. I shall use "significance" for non-linguistic and extra-linguistic meaning. A linguistic expression can have extra-linguistic meaning, i.e., significance. A sentence is the smallest unit in a language that carries such significance, while a word is the smallest unit of meaning. The meaning of a word, although independent of any one sentence that uses it, is not independent of the entirety of the sentences in which it appears. Meaning is rooted in significance, and there would be no

signifying nor significance outside a community. Hence, Ayer's story of how a single person invented language by matching words to things is only a fairy-tale.

In the conclusion of this essay, I will summarize what contributions the major argument may make for bettering our understanding of the nature of words, and point out the obvious limitations of what has been achieved in the essay.

PREVIEW

Chapter 2

COMMON NAMES

Common names or class names distinguish themselves on the one hand from proper names and on the other hand from words that are not names. But it is not altogether clear what words are names and what words are not; we will see in the next chapter, there is also no clear line between common names and proper names. However, to avoid controversial issues at the beginning stage I shall employ the term "common name" or "class name" as they are ordinarily understood. Relevant issues will emerge and be clarified in the course of our investigation.

2.1 Similarity

There are many reasons why a number of things are said to belong to one and the same class. The reason favored most by the tradition is that members of the same class share certain common features or similarities, hence they are called by the same name. Wittgenstein and Austin have challenged similarity as the universal basis for forming classes.

Wittgenstein introduced the notion "family resemblances" to explain why different things are called by the same name. Instead of finding characteristics common to all games, "we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" (Wittgenstein, 1953, p.32).

Following Wittgenstein's lead, Austin has also challenged similarity as the principal criterion for calling different things by the same name. He writes that "it is a matter of urgency that a doctrine should be developed about the various kinds of good reasons, for which we 'call different things (strictly, sorts of things rather than particular things) by the same name'" (1979, p.70). In the following pages, Austin himself sorts out seven kinds of possible reasons:

(a) Paronymity. Examples: healthy body, healthy complexion, healthy exercise; with the primary nuclear sense in "healthy body."

(b) Analogous terms. Examples: foot, change.

(c) Family resemblance. (Example: game.)

(d) Use in incomplete senses. Examples: fascist, cynicism.

(e) (Genetic terms or) a determinable and its determinates. Examples: color and red, green, blue, etc.; pleasure.

(f) (Category compound words.) Examples: love, the passion or love the object loved; youth; truth.

(g) (Participating words.) Examples: cricket bat, cricket ball, cricket umpire; good; happiness.

However, we shall show in this essay that although there are many factors that affect the formation of general terms, similarity remains the fundamental factor as far as common names are concerned. Let us then begin our study of common names with a discussion of similarity.

When speaking of similarity, we tend to ask "similar in what aspect?" Two things may look alike, sound alike, or taste alike. My hunger yesterday and my hunger this morning feel alike. Two attacks affect

alike. Two friends behave alike. Two pens function alike. Similarity in some aspects is simpler for us to apprehend than in some other aspects. It is easier to tell whether two apples look alike than telling whether two historical events proceed alike. Again, two things may be alike at once in many aspects. Two bananas taste alike, and also look alike. The members of the class "red thing" are similar only in having the red color, while the members of a "natural kind," e.g., horses, are similar in many aspects. Some similarity may be more fundamental than others in that it explains the others. Living things that have the same genes grow alike and look alike.

Among all sorts of similarities, looking alike is most often taken as an indication of things' belonging to the same category in everyday life. When two things are alike in many aspects, looking alike is most likely involved. Indeed, the very word "aspect" involves looking. A banana tastes like another banana; but we can tell they are both bananas before we taste because they do not only taste alike but also look alike. In general, we can often tell what a thing is by simply having a look at it: this is a bridge and that is a house. A mother may teach her baby the name "apple" by showing it a wax apple. The priority of looking in the notion of similarity is in accordance with the priority of looking and seeing in human perception and language in general.

When talking about looking alike, what is similar is more the overall look than the detail. In general, what we see and remember is first a gestalt. When I see a man walking into my room, I see a man, not a complex of colors, lines, and shapes. Gestalt perception involves

situational factors. We tell a bridge from a house not only by their shape, but also by their location and surroundings. Dogs do not all look similar per se, but being walked by a person on a leash in a residential area help us recognize them as dogs.

Although we can often tell whether a thing belongs to a class simply by a look, we would rarely claim that the thing belongs to the class solely or mainly because of its look. We can tell that the person walking in the street is a man, not a woman, simply by his clothing and gait, but this does not mean that a man differs from a woman because he walks differently and wears different clothing. The priority in looking does not amount to its fundamentality. We rather take the way a thing looks as a mark by which we can easily recognize it, and we are well aware that the mark is not infallible. The awareness is contained in the meaning of the very word "look" and in the meaning of "sound," "appear," "seem" etc.

2.2 Basic Level and Common Names

Not all words are names, and not all general terms are common names. Unlike "oak" and "molybdenum," "animal" and "product" are hardly words which we are inclined to call "names." When Austin provides examples to show that there are reasons other than similarity by which we call different things by the same name, none of the words, e.g., "healthy," "foot," "pleasure," which he examines is a word that we would usually call a "name." Similarity of class members seems to be a criterion for

determining whether a general term is a common name or not. To test this, and to search for other possible characteristics of the words that we are inclined to call "common names," we find the taxonomic structure of category terms to be a very helpful clue. Let us first take a look at the well-established animal taxonomy:

A, ? B, animal C, mammal D, dog E, terrier F, Australian terrier G, Fido.

A-F indicate category levels. We might also insert chordate or other intermediate level categories. But the paradigm that we have drawn is already sufficient for our purposes.

G is the individual level; the word at level G, Fido, is not a category term, but a proper name. For most taxonomies, we do not have commonly used names at the individual level. We do not have proper names for bees or desks; when we have to talk about an individual table or bee, we say "this table," or "the bee on the flower."

Level A is left blank, leaving room for filling in a higher category than animal, perhaps organism, being, object, entity, thing. But all the highest categories are of little use for serving as base categories for subclasses. Should "animal" be regarded as a kind of object? The category "object" seems to be a bit too narrow to include animal, while "being" may be too broad to exclude property and event.¹

Level D is the basic level. "Basic level category" is one of the key notions in George Lakoff's major work Women, Fire and Dangerous Things (1987). According to Lakoff, the basic level is located in the middle

¹ For an interesting discussion about these highest categories, see Vendler, pp.57-58.

of a taxonomy: e.g., for plant and animal taxonomies, the level of genus is basic, and "dog" and "oak" are accordingly basic level categories.

The following are characteristic of the basic level:

(a) The highest level at which category members have similarly perceived overall shapes.

(b) The highest level at which a single mental image can reflect the entire category.

(c) The level at which we are fastest at identifying category members.

(d) The level with the most commonly used labels for category members and with the shortest primary lexemes.

(e) The first level named and understood by children and to enter the lexicon of a language.

(f) The level at which terms are used in neutral contexts.

(g) The level at which most of our knowledge is organized.

Lackoff calls the categories which are higher than the basic level categories in a taxonomy "superordinate categories," those which are lower are called "subordinate categories." Among these levels, B may be regarded as the secondarily basic level. We say that Fido is a dog and dog is a kind of animal more often than that Fido is a retriever and retriever is a kind of mammal. We could arrange some other kinds of categories in taxonomic hierarchies in accordance to the animal taxonomy. For example, we could establish:

B, plant C, tree D, walnut E, ? F, black walnut

B, furniture C, ? D, chair E, armchair F, ?

B, color C, cool color? D, blue E, ? F, ?

B, metal C, ? D, gold E, ? F, ?

For the purposes of a study of names:

(1) Basic level is the highest level at which we are inclined to call the terms "common names." Superordinate categories are not typical common names. "Dog" is a common name, and so is "terrier." But "mammal" and "animal" are not names, unless we force ourselves to regard all general terms as names in order to conform with a certain theory.

(2) Members of a basic level class exhibit great similarities in many aspects.

(3) Several basic level classes form a group, each class being a peer juxtaposed to the others and all belonging parallelly to a higher category. "Dog," "horse," and "bear" are peer classes and belong to "animal." "Horse," "cow," and "sheep" belong to "livestock." In a somewhat looser manner, "water," "earth," and "fire" are peers and belong to the category of "Urelement."

(4) The higher category is fully divided into its subclasses, each represented by a common name. No animal is neither a dog nor a horse nor the like.

(5) Each class of the basic level is distinct from its peer classes; few peer classes overlap.

(6) The basic level category exhibits relatively little prototype effects² in its relation to its subclasses. In medieval terms, the

² Category members are often not equal in representing the category. For example, experiments have shown that robins and sparrows are regarded as better examples of bird than chickens and ostriches. Thus, robins and sparrows are prototypes of birds, and the asymmetry within a

higher category is indifferent to its members.

(7) The terms of these basic level classes exhibit great neutrality.

The characteristics listed above obviously overlap with those which Lakoff lists for characterizing basic level categories. But we should not be led to equate a basic level category with a common name. First, the characteristics listed here can be ascribed to terms of lower levels as well. For example, "terrier" peers with "retriever" and the like, and belongs to "dog" with them. "Dog" is the base category here, which is indifferent to each of its subcategories. Some subordinate terms, therefore, are also common names, even when they are explicitly marked, e.g., "Australian terrier." Similar things can be said about words at the individual level, except that they do not indicate categories, and characteristic (2) does not apply here.

Second, many terms counted as basic level terms are not typical names, e.g., "walking," "war," "fire," and "hot." In a sense, we can say that walking is a subclass of the superordinate category "moving" and can itself be divided into ambling, slumping and the like. But it is rather difficult to determine what peer terms "walking" has, and walking is hardly a distinct form of moving from wandering or roaming. Only in a tidy taxonomy do we have clear cases of basic level categories, subordinate categories, and superordinate categories. Verbs, as well as many other kinds of words, in general do not fall into a tidy taxonomy. This is related to the fact that terms for events and

category is called prototype effects of the category (Lakoff, p.60). The various mechanisms which bring about prototype effects are analyzed in great detail in Women, Fire and Dangerous Things.

activities are not usually regarded as names.

2.3 Superordinate Categories

As far as the characteristics listed in the last section are concerned, words at the basic level exhibit greater affinity with words at lower levels than with those at the superordinate levels. And we noticed that these are all characteristics of names.

"Animal" is a superordinate category term, not a name. Contrasted with basic level and subordinate terms, we find that "animal" does not have characteristics 1-3 listed in the last section and that the others fit it only awkwardly. While similarity is more often than not a reason for different things to bear the same name, it is insignificant for the forming of superordinate categories. When Austin questions similarity as the only reason for calling different things by the same name, none of the words he chooses as counterexamples is a basic level category or a subordinate category, and he is sensitive enough to this to notice that "different sorts of things" is a more suitable expression in this context than "different (particular) things."

The grammatical similarity between "Fido is a dog" and "a dog is an animal" leaves the impression that the relation between Fido and dog is analogous to that between dog and animal. "Animal" is then sometimes also regarded as a common name, as is "dog," except that "animal" is more abstract and has a broader range of denotation. Logically speaking, if Fido is a dog and a dog an animal, then Fido is an animal.