

The *tao* of metaphysics The epidemiology of words

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Words, words, words

Three puzzles:

1. Hammurabi, ancient Babylonian fond of trivialities, assents without any doubt to “Hesperus is Hesperus”, while he feels being under no obligation whatsoever to accept “Hesperus is Phosphorus”, which strikes him as a rather risky astronomical hypothesis.
2. In Genoa, Peter learns Italian by direct interaction with its inhabitants. As his mastery of Italian increase, he acquires a solid disposition to utter “Genova non è bella”. His neighbours conclude that “Piero crede che Genova non è bella” expresses a truth. Some monolingual visitor from Paris, having heard Pierre utter “Gènes est jolie”, assures them that so still does “Pierre croit que Gènes est jolie”. Are we to think the same both of “Peter believes that Genoa is not beautiful” and of “Peter believes that Genoa is beautiful”?
3. Saul often heard his parents talk of a man called “Paderewski” and his musical accomplishments. Much later, he meets a politician called “Paderewski”. He is astonished to hear that Paderewski is Paderewski, that the two Paderewskis are really one and the same man, for he believed that no politician ever was a musician. Firmly believing in the law of self-identity, he would not, however, be astonished to hear that Paderewski is self-identical.

The metaphysics of words

Problems of the type/token model:

- (i) What are types? Not sets of tokens (untokened types, disjointness condition, identity conditions); nor patterns (untokened types, medium-specificity, disjointness condition); nor abstract objects (causal links)
- (ii) What does identity-as-to-type consist in?
- (iii) How are tokens and types individuated?
- (iv) What is the occurrence of a type?

Kaplan’s “common currency model”. Words, and proper names in particular, are continuants, constituted by stages (inscriptions, utterances), in roughly the way different quantities of water constitute a river. The similarity among common currency names is accounted for by the introduction of generic names.

The species/exemplar model. Names are (like) viruses: they are natural objects, in space and time, which endure and move, spread and mutate while spreading. ‘Generic names’ are not names, but blueprints for names.

The epidemiology of words

Names are ‘entia successiva’, sequences of stages. Inscriptions, utterances and memory traces of proper names are concrete objects (cultural artefacts), entia per se, and some of them are appropriately related in virtue of coming the one ‘from’ the other. Genidentity, the relation responsible

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for two utterances (inscriptions, memory traces) being utterances (inscriptions, memory traces) of the same word, is the ancestral of coordination, where two utterances are coordinated if one of them essentially involves an intention to use some syntactical-lexical form, some sound pattern or some other physical item *in the same way*, whatever it is, as the salient physical item is used in the other. Coordination of two uses of the lexical-syntactical forms “a” and “b” may be manifested by a disposition to draw the following inference:

$$\frac{\begin{array}{l} a \text{ is } F \\ b \text{ is } G \end{array}}{a \text{ is } F \text{ and } G}$$

Statements of identity between coordinated uses of names are a priori knowable, as are predications of reference-fixing descriptions.

Niches and functional roles

Both words and biological viruses are (vertically) individuated not just by their reproductive process, but also (horizontally) by their ecological niche. Both components are present in the definition of a virus species proposed by van Regenmortel (1990) and finally accepted, after years of controversy, by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses in 1991:

“A virus species is defined as a polythetic class of viruses that constitutes a replicating lineage and occupies a particular ecological niche”.

A name occupies a certain place in its environment and both its genotype (its ‘nature’) as well its phenotype (its syntactical-lexical form) are affected by environmental factors.

The riddles diagnosed

1. Hammurabi’s uses of “Hesperus” are tied by his purely notional intentions of co-referring to *whatever* was the thing baptised using “the brightest star on the evening sky”. His immune system, so to say, reacts very differently to uses of “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” and when he learns that he can henceforth link those uses by an intention of co-referring, he makes an important cognitive gain.
2. What is special about Pierre’s case is that his uses of “Genova” are causally insulated from his (prior or simultaneous) uses of “Gênes” - they have their own ecological niche and play a different functional role. Uses of “Genova”, even for Pierre, are linked by an intention of co-referring to other uses of “Genova”, and perhaps even to a reference-fixing description like “the city I now live in”, but they are not so linked to his uses of “Gênes”. It is this functional isolation of the two lines of interrelated uses that allows for a differential response by his immune system.
3. Saul’s immune system does not recognise that the new infection is one it is already immune against. His case is the same as Pierre’s, with the slight and unimportant difference that the two words involved are homographs.

Further advantages

1. Cognitive fix; names allow for de re thoughts, because they reach back to their origins; they satisfy Frege’s constraint because ideally rational individuals are required to be economical in their terminological equipment; they are as fine-grained as functional roles because species are individuated not just by their causal origins but also by their ecological niche.
2. Rigidity: if names are natural objects, they can be distinguished from modally stable descriptions; the name can be said to depend on its bearer in a way the bearer does not depend on the name.
3. Quotation: the deferred ostension theory is compatible with the claim that quotation involves exhibiting a (paradigm) exemplar.