

Bad news for anyone? — A Reply to Abbott

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It is my considered opinion that Barbara Abbott misrepresents the argument of “Good news about the description theory of names” in a variety of ways, as a consequence of which the force of her observations is considerably less than the unwary reader may have been led to believe. So perhaps it is helpful to briefly recapitulate what I was up to in “Good news”.

The general picture is this. Proper names are definite, and definites are presuppositional expressions. The presupposition theory I adhere to imposes a handful of general constraints which restrict the construal of all presuppositional expressions, definites and names included. The theory does not entail that all presuppositional expressions are alike. But such differences as we find must be due to specific differences between expressions or between the environments in which they occur. Definites behave somewhat differently from aspectual verbs because they trigger different kinds of presuppositions; semantically attenuate definites behave somewhat differently from heavy ones; and perhaps names behave somewhat differently from other definites, because their descriptive content is rather special. But broadly speaking names should pattern with definite expressions, which in turn should pattern with other presuppositional devices.

If, on the other hand, we adopt the Millian doctrine defended by Kripke and his followers, then names are *very* different from definite descriptions. For a Millian a name has no meaning, no descriptive content that could steer us towards its referent; and although philosophers have made some pretty wild claims about definite descriptions, none have gone so far as to deny that they possess semantic content. Supposing then that definite descriptions are indeed descriptive, the Millian analysis implies that names and definite descriptions are about as similar as cabbages and kings, and it would be nothing short of miraculous if the former behaved as if they were a garden variety of the latter.

It is with these considerations in mind that I set out to muster empirical evidence for something *linguists* have always taken for granted, to wit that names are definite expressions. This exercise served a twofold purpose. My first objective was to demonstrate that names and definites have so much in common that we are entitled to demand a unified theory. Secondly, I wanted to provide such a theory and show that it accounts for the many similarities between names and definites.

Abbott's commentary is marred by a number of misunderstandings, beginning with a false opposition she discerns between her views and mine:

[...] throughout his paper Geurts uses the phrase 'definite NP' as though it meant 'definite description'. But it is not true that definite descriptions are the only type of definite NP in English (or in other languages). In addition to definite descriptions, pronouns and demonstrative phrases as well as proper names and sometimes universally quantified NPs are typically cited as subtypes. (p. xxxx)

The notion that my use of "definite NP" was meant to exclude pronouns and demonstratives is just false. Several of Abbott's objections hinge on this mistaken notion however; for example:

In any case, since infelicity in this type of *there*-sentence is a characteristic not just of proper names and definite descriptions, but of definite NPs more generally, it does not provide evidence in favor of the metalinguistic theory for proper names. Rather, it will be some characteristic of all definite NPs which will provide an explanation for this kind of behavior. (p. xxxx)

I agree. But then what is the problem? The reason Abbott takes this to be an objection lies in a second misunderstanding. Abbott has read “Good news” as implying that, taken one by one, each of the characteristics shared by names and (other) definites prove my theory right. She is mistaken. *All* of my observations corroborate that, contrary to what the Millian view on names would lead us to expect, names and definites are very much alike, and *some* of them lend support to one particular version of the description theory of names. This was my argument.

Abbott’s third misunderstanding is that I hold names and definites to be alike in each and every respect. I don’t, but several of Abbott’s objections presuppose that I do. For example:

Geurts gave the example in (4) to show that proper names may be used generically.

(4) {The panzercroc/Pristichampsus} hunted during the Eocene Epoch [...]

However *Pristichampsus* is the name of a *kind* of thing, not a particular – hence generic use is its normal use. This is not like the definite description *the panzercroc*, which may also be used for particulars, as in (5).

(5) a. The panzercroc slithered to the edge of the river and ate a duck.

b. #Pristichampsus slithered to the edge of the river and ate a duck.

The inherently generic *Pristichampsus* may not be so used, as (5b) shows. Thus proper names are not really parallel to definite descriptions in this respect. (p. xxxx)

If my version of the description theory of names is correct, names have a rather peculiar kind of descriptive content, something like “the individual named so-and-so”. It shouldn’t come as a surprise, therefore, that they don’t mirror “ordinary” definites down to the finest detail. (There is a further error in this passage as well: my use of the term “individual” does not discriminate against abstract individuals. This usage is common in the literature, and even if it weren’t it should have been obvious that I didn’t want to equate individuals with particular individuals.)

There is one passage in Abbott’s note that I would like to submit to closer scrutiny, because it casts aspersions on what I consider to be key evidence for my theory:

The last two types of data to consider are similar. Both involve examples where proper names are interpreted within the scope of a sentence operator. Geurts gives the examples in (8):

- (8) a. If a child is christened ‘Bambi’, and Disney Inc. hear about it, then they will sue Bambi’s parents. [...]
b. In English, Leslie may be a man or a woman. [...]

My reply to these examples is that the proper names here are not being used as names of individuals. Instead, the proper name *does* have a meaning much like the one proposed by the quotation theory. However this fact does not lend support to the metalinguistic analysis. The reason is that this possibility is not confined to proper names – *any* kind of linguistic expression may be used in this metalinguistic way.

Apparently, even if I am right, it is for the wrong reasons. Three remarks are in order though. First, although every expression can be used to refer to itself, it is doubtful that every kind of expression can be used the way “Bambi” and “Leslie” are used in (8). For example, consider the following pair:

John is always male.

The pope is always male.

The first sentence can be construed as saying that all individuals named “John” are male (and this is predicted by my analysis); but the second sentence does not seem to admit of an analogous construal. Secondly, Abbott’s criticism is gratuitous unless we are given observational criteria for differentiating between ordinary and metalinguistic uses, which she doesn’t provide, and which, to the best of my knowledge, don’t exist, either. Thirdly, Abbott doesn’t explain how a theory of metalinguistic interpretation would account for the examples under discussion. So the upshot of her remarks is that the phenomena in (8) *might* have to be analyzed differently, with which I fully agree.

The long and short of it is that most of Abbott’s commentary is beside the point: the foregoing remarks suffice to defuse all of Abbott’s discussion of my observations, save for (e) and the last paragraph of (i,j), which I leave as exercises for the reader.

One final remark. The theoretical position Abbott takes in her commentary is a puzzling one. On the one hand, she appears to be a Millian, and therefore committed to the view that names and definites are fundamentally different. On the other hand, she goes out of her way to emphasize that names *are* definite expressions — to the point even of implying (falsely) that I have said otherwise. How are these two tenets to be reconciled?