

## “PLEASE EXPLAIN WHAT A RIGID DESIGNATOR IS”

A **rigid** designator is a singular term that refers to the same thing in or when evaluated at every possible world in which it has any reference at all. A **flaccid** designator is a singular term that refers to one thing in one possible world and something else in at least one other possible world.

But what on earth is meant by “referring in or evaluated at a possible world”? I can’t understand the definition!

In order to understand how rigid or flaccid designation works it is helpful to start with a flaccid description. Consider ‘The best male tennis player in the world in the 1990s’. As a matter of fact, this definite description denotes Pete Sampras. We can put it this way: *when evaluated at the actual world*, the bit of our language ‘The best male tennis player in the world in the 1990s’ refers to Sampras because he *actually is* the best male tennis player in the world in the 1990s. Now consider three possible scenarios.

Possible world P<sub>1</sub>: Pete Sampras breaks his arm at tennis camp as a kid. This makes him hate tennis so he plays baseball instead. He’s no good at it and ends up an investment banker.

Possible world P<sub>2</sub>: Pete Sampras starts out as a fantastic tennis player. Then at 17 he first reads Hume’s *Dialogues on Natural Religion*. He becomes a highly intelligent plumber.

Possible World P<sub>3</sub>: Pete Sampras wins every Grand Slam tennis tournament in the 1990s.

When *evaluated at* P<sub>1</sub> or P<sub>2</sub>, ‘The best male tennis player in the world in the 1990s’ doesn’t refer to Sampras (perhaps it refers to Andre Agassi); when evaluated at P<sub>3</sub> (or at the actual world) it does refer to Sampras. That is, when we search around in P<sub>1</sub>-P<sub>3</sub> to see who would count as being “the best ...” we don’t choose the same person every time. That’s what we mean in saying that the definite description refers to different things “in” or, perhaps better, “when evaluated at” those possible worlds; the description is flaccid. On the other hand, ‘the positive square root of nine’ refers to the very same thing when evaluated at every possible world; so it’s rigid. And ‘Pete Sampras’ refers to the very same thing in each world (who else would be Pete Sampras but Pete Sampras?); so it’s rigid.

Notice that ‘the best male ...’ actually refers to just Pete Sampras. And in those three worlds P<sub>1</sub>-P<sub>3</sub>, ‘the best ...’, as the people *there* use that bit of language, might refer to Sampras, London, the number 6, or nothing at all. In my descriptions of those possible worlds I said nothing about the languages they use. There might not be any English speaking communities in those worlds. To settle the question of the rigidity of a term T, we take T as we *actually* use it, imagine some possible world, and then ask ourselves, using our own language, “Who is T in that world?” If it’s the same person or thing as in the actual world, then the term is rigid.

**Challenge:** What is the fatal flaw in the following argument?

In a different possible world we could use ‘Pete Sampras’ to refer to something other than Pete Sampras. We can stipulate that in that world Andre Agassi is named ‘Pete Sampras’ and Pete Sampras is named ‘Andre Agassi’. So ‘Pete Sampras’ does not refer to the same thing in every possible world; it is not rigid.

*See next page for answer; but try to solve it yourself first.*

### ***Answer to Challenge:***

As mentioned earlier when we say that an expression “refers to the same thing in or evaluated at every possible world” we do *not* mean that the people in those possible worlds use that name in those worlds to refer to the same object that we in the actual world refer to with the name. For instance, we do not mean that the people in  $P_1$ ,  $P_2$ , and  $P_3$  all use ‘Pete Sampras’ to refer to Pete Sampras. They might call him by a different name. Instead, what we mean when we say that an expression “refers to different things in or evaluated at different possible worlds” is this:

If you take the way *we* use ‘The best tennis ...’, in this the *real, actual* world, and you consider what referent it would have when *evaluated at* those possible worlds  $P_1$ ,  $P_2$ , and  $P_3$ , you will see that ‘The best ...’ as we use it—not as they use it—picks out or refers to *different* people in those worlds (Sampras, Agassi, etc.). That is, when we search around in  $P_1$ - $P_3$  to see who would count as being “the best...” we don’t choose the same person every time.

On the other hand,

If you take the way *we* use ‘Pete Sampras’, in this the *real, actual* world, and you consider what referent it would have when *evaluated at* those possible worlds  $P_1$ ,  $P_2$ , and  $P_3$ , you will see that ‘Pete Sampras’ as we use it—not as they use it—picks out or refers to *the same person* in each of those worlds that it does in the actual world (Sampras, the person). That is, when we search around in  $P_1$ - $P_3$  to see who would count as being “Pete Sampras” we choose the same person every time.

Make sure you compare the two indented sentences above carefully.

### ***How to Test a Term to See if It’s Rigid:***

When trying to figure out if an arbitrary linguistic expression L is rigid do the following. First find out what the actual, real referent of L is, call the referent R. So L actually refers to R. For instance, suppose L is ‘The richest person in 2000’. In the real world this refers to Bill Gates, so R is Gates. Then *try* to describe several possible scenarios in which whatever is L isn’t R. For instance:

Scenario 1: just like the real world except that Bill Gates dies as a poor infant.

Scenario 2: just like the real world except that in 2000 Donald Trump had 100 billion dollars and Bill Gates had 94 billion dollars.

When we apply ‘The richest person in 2000’ to these scenarios, it refers to something other than its actual referent; that is, in those scenarios the richest person in 2000 isn’t Bill Gates. That is, when we search around in those scenarios to see who would count as being “the richest person in 2000” we don’t choose the same person every time. So this L is flaccid; we can design a possible world such that richest person in 2000 in that world isn’t Bill Gates.

Now use ‘Saul Kripke’ for L; obviously R is Saul Kripke.

Scenario 1: just like the real world except that Kripke decides to go into mathematics instead of philosophy and does not do any philosophy.

Scenario 2: just like the real world except that Kripke died as an infant.

Scenario 3: just like the real world except that Kripke published more of his writings.

When we apply ‘Saul Kripke’ to these three scenarios, it refers to the same person every time. That is, when we search around in these scenarios to see who would count as being “Saul Kripke” we choose the same person every time (who else would do?). So this L is rigid; we cannot design a possible world such that Saul Kripke in that world isn’t Saul Kripke.