

A KRIPKEAN ARGUMENT FOR DESCRIPTIVISM

Jens Kipper and Zeynep Soysal

University of Rochester

Abstract

In this paper, we offer a novel defense of descriptivism about reference. Our argument is based on principles about the relevance of speaker intentions to reference that are shared by many opponents of descriptivism, including Saul Kripke. We first show that two such principles that are plausibly endorsed by Kripke and other prominent externalists in fact entail descriptivism. The first principle states that when certain kinds of speaker intentions are present, they suffice to determine and explain reference. According to the second principle, certain speaker intentions must be present whenever something determines or explains reference. We then go on to make these principles more precise and argue that it would be costly to deny either of them. Since on the more precise understanding we suggest, the conjunction of these principles still entails descriptivism, we conclude that opponents of descriptivism have to give up some highly plausible assumption about the relation between speaker intentions and reference.

1 Introduction

The descriptivist theory of reference—henceforth ‘descriptivism’—states, in outline, that a speaker refers to some entity with some expression because that entity is the unique bearer of the property that the speaker associates with this expression. What it is for a

speaker to associate a property with an expression, in turn, is standardly explicated in terms of the speaker's intention to refer to the bearer of that property with that expression.

Descriptivism has been unpopular, due in large part to criticism from Saul Kripke and other externalists about reference, such as Tyler Burge and Hilary Putnam. In this paper, we provide a novel argument for descriptivism that is based on assumptions shared even by these prominent critics. These philosophers grant that if a speaker intends to use an expression with an idiosyncratic meaning, then she does use that expression with the idiosyncratic meaning. They also assume that when reference is explained by certain external factors—as it is in social or causal theories of reference—the speaker must still intend the external factors to be relevant to the reference of her expression. We show that descriptivism follows from two principles that are supported by such standard assumptions about the relevance of speaker intentions to reference.

Our paper is structured as follows. In §2, we delineate and argue for our two principles concerning the roles of speaker intentions, and we show that they entail descriptivism. Roughly, the first principle says that when speaker intentions are present, they suffice to explain reference, while the second principle says that certain speaker intentions must be present whenever something explains reference. We argue that the best way for opponents of descriptivism to resist our argument is to accept only a weaker version of our second principle. In §3, we strengthen our argument for descriptivism by construing the notion of speaker intentions in terms of certain kinds of speaker dispositions, and by showing that, on this construal, the stronger version of our second principle is difficult to reject. In §4, we consider and reply to two potential objections to our argument and to descriptivism more generally.

2 Necessary and sufficient speaker intentions

2.1 Preliminaries

In what follows, we argue that reference is explained by speaker intentions or associated properties. By ‘reference’, we here mean the reference of an expression in a speaker’s idiolect, and we assume that this is the reference of the concept that the speaker expresses with the expression. This usage is in line with standard terminology, which is adopted by proponents and opponents of descriptivism alike (e.g., Burge (1979, 90; 1993, 312), Kripke (1980, 8, 71), Millikan (1993, 281f.), Putnam (1973, 704)).¹ Accordingly, by ‘intention’, we mean a speaker’s general intention concerning the reference of an expression, as opposed to an intention that a speaker might only have on a specific occasion—the latter might track the notion of speaker’s reference (cf. Kripke (1977, 263f.)). For ease of expression, we assume that the referent of any kind of expression can be construed as a class; our claims can easily be rephrased into the more common talk of, for instance, the referent of a kind term being a kind, and the referent of a singular term being an individual (as opposed to the class containing only that individual). Finally, we understand ‘property’ in a very permissive sense, such that even highly “gruesome” categories count as properties in our sense. This assumption, too, is in line with standard ways of construing descriptivism (e.g., Jackson (1998b, 202)). With these clarifications in place, descriptivism can be defined as follows:

Descriptivism For any speaker, *S*, expression, *e*, and class, *C*, if *S* refers to *C* with *e*, then there is a property, *F*, such that (i) *S* intends to refer to all and only *F*s with *e*, and (ii) *C* is the class of all and only *F*s; and *S* refers to *C* with *e* because *F* satisfies (i) and (ii).²

¹ For an explanation of this usage, cf., e.g., (Wikforss 2008; 2017).

² One might find this formulation problematic, since the notion of reference appears both in the antecedent and in the consequent of the conditional. The more precise version of Descriptivism we suggest in §3 avoids this issue.

Following standard usage, if S intends to refer to all and only F s with e , we call F ‘the property S associates with e ’ (e.g., (Kripke 1980, 74), (Jackson 1998b, 202)). Descriptivism thus states that whenever a speaker refers to a class with an expression, this is because she intends to refer to all and only the bearers of a particular property—or, equivalently, because she associates a particular property—with the expression, and because the class referred to is the class of entities that have this property.

Let us make two further clarifications about descriptivism. First, we assume that the speakers in question are rationally unimpaired, as all traditional descriptivists do (e.g., Jackson (1998a, 151, 161; 1998b, 211f.)). Second, the descriptivist account we defend is intended to have a very broad scope and to include, for instance, natural kind terms and proper names. For indexical expressions and other context-sensitive expressions, the formulation of descriptivism would have to be adjusted, since speaker intentions can only determine their reference relative to a context. We ignore this complication here.

2.2 A Kripkean argument

One might have thought that vocal critics of descriptivism and of internalist accounts of reference more generally—such as Kripke, Putnam, and Burge—believe that speaker intentions are irrelevant to reference. But in fact, all of them hold that speaker intentions matter. For instance, Kripke concedes that if a speaker intends to use a name to refer to the bearer of a certain property, then they do refer to the bearer of this property when they use the name:

The picture that leads to the cluster-of-descriptions theory is something like this: One is isolated in a room; the entire community of other speakers, everything else, could disappear; and one determines the reference for himself by saying—‘By “Gödel” I shall mean the man, whoever he is, who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic’. Now you can do this if you want to. There’s nothing really preventing it. You can just stick to that determination. If that’s

what you do, then if Schmidt discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic, you *do* refer to him when you say ‘Gödel did such and such’. (Kripke 1980, 91)³

Moreover, Kripke points out that there are actual cases where reference is plausibly explained by speaker intentions:

Another case [. . .] might be when the police in London use the name ‘Jack’ or ‘Jack the Ripper’ to refer to the man, whoever he is, who committed all these murders, or most of them. Then they are giving the reference of the name by a description. (Kripke 1980, 79f.)

If Leverrier indeed gave the name ‘Neptune’ to the planet before it was ever seen, then he fixed the reference of ‘Neptune’ by means of the description just mentioned. (Kripke 1980, fn. 33)

Kripke’s remarks suggest that he endorses the following principle, which we call ‘SI’ for ‘Sufficient Intentions’:

SI For any speaker, *S*, and expression, *e*, if there is a property, *F*, such that *S* intends to refer to all and only *F*s with *e*, then *S* refers with *e* to the class, *C*, of all and only *F*s, and *S* refers to *C* with *e* because (i) *S* intends to refer to all and only *F*s with *e* and (ii) *C* is the class of all and only *F*s.

In other words, Kripke grants that when speakers associate properties, these associations explain reference. But of course, Kripke argues that there usually aren’t such speaker associations, and thus that reference isn’t usually explained by speaker intentions (Kripke 1980, 91).⁴

Kripke outlines an alternative, causal, theory of reference, according to which the reference of an expression is explained by a causal relation between the speaker’s use

³ Jackson (1998b, 205; 2010, 112) also refers to this passage in his defense of descriptivism.

⁴ Discussions by Putnam (1962), Burge (1979), and Devitt and Sterelny (1999, 96–101) suggest that they also endorse SI.

of the expression and the referent of the expression. This causal relation leads back to the initial dubbing of the referent, mediated by other speakers from whom the speaker “borrows” reference (Kripke 1980, 91–97). More generally, all externalist theories take reference to be explained by some external relation between the referent of (or instances of the kind referred to by) the expression, and the speaker’s use of the expression (or simply, the speaker and the expression).⁵ For instance, take the view that *S*’s use of ‘Gödel’ refers to Gödel because ‘Gödel’ is the name given to Gödel at the origin of the causal chain leading to *S*’s use of the name. Then there is some relation, *E*, between Gödel, ‘Gödel’, and *S*, where *E* = *X is the person referred to as Y at the origin of the causal chain leading to Z’s usage*. It is then because Gödel is *E*-related to ‘Gödel’ and to *S* that *S*’s use of ‘Gödel’ refers to Gödel.

According to Kripke, even when reference is explained by causal relations, speaker intentions still play an important role. For instance, Kripke suggests that for a speaker to borrow reference from others in her linguistic community, the speaker must intend to borrow reference:

When the name is ‘passed from link to link’, the receiver of the name must, I think, intend when he learns it to use it with the same reference as the man from whom he heard it. If I hear the name ‘Napoleon’ and decide it would be a nice name for my pet aardvark, I do not satisfy this condition. (Kripke 1980, 96)

Putnam concurs:

Kripke and I argued that the intention to preserve reference through a historical chain of uses and the intention to cooperate socially in the fixing of reference make it possible to use terms successfully to refer although no one definite description is associated with any term by all speakers who use that term. (Putnam 1980, 476)⁶

⁵ Such externalist theories are developed, e.g., in (Donnellan 1970), (Putnam 1975), and (Devitt 1981).

⁶ Similarly, Burge (1979, 114) maintains that an individual’s “intentions or attitudes towards communal

It is natural to think that this principle generalizes, such that for any candidate relation that might explain reference, a speaker must intend to refer to the things that are so related to her and her expression. We call the resulting claim ‘NI’, for ‘Necessary Intentions’:

NI For any speaker, S , expression, e , and class, C , if there is a relation, E , between S , e , and C ’s members, because of which S refers to C with e , then S intends to refer to all and only the things that are E -related to e and S .⁷⁸

SI and NI together entail Descriptivism, which can be seen as follows. Take any situation in which S refers to C with e . There are two kinds of cases to consider. Assume that (a) S intends to refer to all and only F s with e . Since, by SI, C is then the class of all and only F s, and S refers to C with e because S intends to refer to all and only F s with e , and because C is the class of all and only F s, this kind of case is in accordance with Descriptivism. As we saw above, opponents of descriptivism maintain that such cases are rare. They want to say that, ordinarily, (b) there is some (external) relation, E , between S , e , and C ’s members, because of which S refers to C with e . But then, by NI, S intends to refer to all and only the things that are E -related to e and S . Therefore, there is a property, *being E -related to e and S* , such that S intends to refer to all and only the things that have this property. Thus, by SI, C is the class of all and only the things that are E -related to S and e , and e refers to C because (i) S intends to refer to all and only the things that are E -related to S and e and (ii) C is the class of all and only the things that are E -related to S and e . Consequently, Descriptivism is in accordance with cases of type (b) as well.

conventions” are crucial for determining what concepts she expresses. Burge is naturally interpreted to hold that a necessary condition for deferential concept possession is to “intend[] the word to have its standard meaning” (Wikforss 2017, 3). Others who also seem committed to this kind of constraint include Kaplan (1989, 602), Fodor (1994, 34–36), Woodfield (2000, 449f.), Soames (2002, 65), Williamson (2007, 124), and Goldberg (2009, 589–594).

⁷ Of note is that Raatikainen (2020, 75f.) and Devitt (2006, fn. 6; 2008, fn. 1) have argued that Kripke should be interpreted as holding that intentions must be present only at the time of learning an expression. We return to this issue below.

⁸ Soysal (2020) argues for the existence of analytic truths on the basis of a version of NI.

Since (a) and (b) exhaust the possible options, Descriptivism follows from SI and NI.⁹ Let us note that our argument doesn't use any specific assumptions about the properties that ordinary speakers associate with, for instance, proper names. Nevertheless, the previous discussion suggests that these associated properties might include causal notions, leading to a kind of causal descriptivism (e.g., Kroon (1987))—for proper names, such an account was first suggested by P. F. Strawson (1959). We will discuss this issue briefly in §4.2.¹⁰

In simpler terms, the argument just developed runs like this: According to NI, for a candidate (external) relation to determine reference, the speaker must intend to refer to the things to which they stand in this relation. But SI tells us that whenever there are such intentions, reference is determined and explained by these intentions. An example should serve to illustrate this. In Burge's thought experiment, a patient comes to his doctor thinking that he has developed arthritis in his thigh (Burge 1979, 77–79). According to Burge and other externalists, the fact that this patient's 'arthritis' utterances refer to arthritis is explained by the usage of the word by the experts in his linguistic community. NI tells us that, in such a case, the patient must intend to have the reference of 'arthritis' depend on the usage of the experts in his linguistic community.¹¹ Hence, the patient intends 'arthritis' to refer to all and only those things that have the property of being called 'arthritis' by the experts in his linguistic community. Further, according to SI, whenever a speaker has such intentions, they explain reference. Consequently, assuming

⁹ Searle (1983, 234–236, 244–248) similarly takes Kripke's commitment to SI to imply that Kripke's causal theory of reference collapses into descriptivism. Kroon (1987) also accepts claims related to SI and NI: his argument for descriptivism proceeds by arguing that in cases of "indirect" reference borrowing, reference requires speaker intentions, and that these intentions suffice to explain reference.

¹⁰ This strategy of building candidate external relations into speaker associations is structurally similar to the "consequentializing" strategy in ethics of building whatever a given nonconsequentialist theory takes to determine the deontic status of an action into the ranking of the outcomes (cf., e.g., Dreier (1993)).

¹¹ Burge (1979, 77, 83f., 90, 94f., 114, 116) assumes that the patient has this intention and the relevant dispositions in terms of which we explicate the notion of intention in §3. According to a natural interpretation, Burge also endorses a version of NI (cf. fn. 6).

NI and SI, any candidate relation for explaining reference collapses into descriptivism.¹²

We just saw that two principles about the relevance of speaker intentions to reference—NI and SI—that are motivated by remarks of Kripke (and other externalists) entail descriptivism. We consider it plausible that Kripke endorses both of these principles—but as we explain below, there is some controversy about whether he endorses NI. In any case, since Kripke certainly wouldn't approve of the consequence of NI and SI we just derived, it is natural to think that he shouldn't endorse them. However, both principles seem very plausible. Consider first SI. In the cases Kripke discusses, a speaker fixes the reference of an expression by stipulating that the term is to refer to whatever entity has certain properties. Kripke believes that this is not a common occurrence. Irrespective of this, it is hard to deny Kripke's claim that if someone does perform such a stipulation, then their usage of the term refers to the bearer of the stipulated properties. Surely, if Le Verrier intended 'Neptune' to refer to the object that caused certain irregularities in Uranus' orbit, then his use of the term did refer to this object, and the thoughts he expressed with utterances involving 'Neptune' were about this object. Even a staunch externalist should concede that such stipulations are possible. To deny this would entail that we have no control at all over the meanings of our words, which seems absurd. Hence, SI is a very plausible principle.¹³

Next, consider NI. It seems plausible that if a speaker has no intention to refer to those things to which they bear a particular relation, then this relation doesn't determine or explain reference. Consider, for instance, a version of Burge's case in which the patient doesn't intend to defer to the experts in his linguistic community, but rather intends the word 'arthritis' to apply to inflammations of muscles. It seems that in this case,

¹²One might hold that, at least in some such cases, the external relation itself also explains reference. In doing so, one could try to argue that externalism is compatible with the conjunction of NI and SI. We believe that this kind of explanatory overdetermination doesn't yield a particularly appealing view. In any case, such a view doesn't challenge Descriptivism.

¹³One might object to SI that one cannot mean anything one wants with one's words. We address this objection, often called the 'Humpty Dumpty problem', in §4.1.

his 'arthritis' utterances don't express thoughts about arthritis, and he doesn't refer to arthritis.¹⁴ Michael Devitt (2006, 102; 2008, 362) rejects NI, however. He argues that in cases of deference to others' usage of a term, a speaker only needs to intend to defer to others' usage at the time they "borrow" the term. Later, a speaker can use the term with its externally determined reference even if they no longer intend to defer to others' usage. Devitt (2006, fn. 6; 2008, fn. 1) notes that his view is in line with Kripke's statement quoted above, according to which the speaker must have the relevant intention "when he learns it" (Kripke 1980, 96).¹⁵ If Devitt's suggestion is correct, then NI is false, and reference can often be explained by external relations. However, Devitt's suggestion isn't credible. Assume, for instance, that the patient in Burge's thought experiment had the intention to defer to the experts' usage of 'arthritis' when he first heard the term, but later loses this intention and decides, instead, to use it to refer to tharthritis, which includes inflammations of muscles. This seems clearly possible. Just as a speaker can stipulate a term to have a certain reference when they first hear it, they can perform such a stipulation later. But Devitt's suggestion seems to imply that this is impossible. Accordingly, if a speaker once had the intention to defer to others' usage, they won't be able to use this term with a different reference later, even if they want to. Such a view would entail that we only have control over the meanings of our words when we first encounter these words, which seems no less absurd than the view that we have no control at all over those meanings.¹⁶

A more promising way for opponents of descriptivism to reject NI is as follows. When arguing for NI above, we were implicitly assuming that if a speaker has no intention to have reference depend on some candidate external relation, then they have some other intentions concerning the usage of the term. But this isn't obvious. Accordingly, one could argue that NI is too strong, since an external relation can explain reference even

¹⁴ Burge himself agrees with this (1979, 94f., 114).

¹⁵ Raatikainen (2020, 75f.) endorses Devitt's interpretation of Kripke.

¹⁶ This proposal therefore isn't very charitable as an interpretation of Kripke. Moreover, of note is that at a number of other places where Kripke makes similar remarks about the role of intentions in preserving reference, he doesn't emphasize the time of learning (e.g., (Kripke 1980, 162, 163)).

if a speaker doesn't intend this relation to determine reference, as long as the speaker doesn't have opposing intentions.¹⁷ Furthermore, one could argue that speakers can have conflicting intentions. For instance, the patient in Burge's case might have both an intention to defer to his doctor in his usage of 'arthritis' and an intention to refer to the cause of his thigh pain. An externalist might hold that in such cases, external relations serve as a "tiebreaker" in determining reference. These objections suggest that NI should be replaced by the following, weaker principle:

NI* For any speaker, *S*, expression, *e*, and class, *C*, if there is a relation, *E*, between *S*, *e*, and *C*'s members, because of which *S* refers to *C* with *e*, then there is no property, *G* ≠ being *E*-related to *e* and *S*, such that *S* exclusively intends to refer to all and only *G*s with *e*.

The objections to NI just sketched open up a way for externalists to avoid that their position collapses into descriptivism. An externalist might argue that NI* is consistent with the view that external relations—such as features of a speaker's natural or social environment—explain reference by default. This includes cases in which the speaker is indifferent towards the relevance of these external relations and has no intentions regarding the usage of the relevant expression, as well as cases in which speakers have conflicting intentions. Speaker intentions are therefore not required for explaining reference, but—in line with SI—they can overrule external relations. It is natural for opponents of descriptivism to combine such a view with the claim that reference is commonly explained by external features since speakers often don't have any (non-conflicting) intentions about the usage of their expressions. They might take this claim to be supported by Kripke's semantic argument against descriptivism, which is supposed to show that often, there are no speaker intentions, or at least none that by themselves determine reference. (We discuss this argument in §4.2.)

Let us summarize what we have argued so far. Kripke, Putnam, Burge, and other oppo-

¹⁷ This view might also yield a more charitable interpretation of Devitt's suggestion.

nents of descriptivism have held that speaker intentions play crucial roles in determining and explaining reference. We showed that, surprisingly, two principles along such lines that are plausibly endorsed by Kripke and other externalists in fact entail descriptivism. We saw that the most promising way to avoid this conclusion is as follows: Opponents of descriptivism should grant, in line with SI, that if there are speaker intentions suitable for determining reference, then these intentions explain reference. But they should maintain—against NI but in line with NI*—that external relations can explain reference in the absence of speaker intentions.

In the following, we argue that the view just sketched isn't tenable. To do this, we first need to make the notion of speaker intentions more precise. We argue that they should be construed in terms of certain dispositions to adjust one's beliefs. Based on this understanding of speaker intentions, we then go on to argue that there are no cases in which speakers are truly indifferent towards the relevance of some external feature to reference, or in which speakers have conflicting intentions in the relevant sense. Consequently, there are no cases in which reference is explained by something other than speaker intentions, which entails descriptivism.

3 Speaker intentions as dispositions

Our discussion in §2 left the notion of speaker intention intuitive. In this section, we propose to explicate this notion as follows:

Conformity For any speaker, *S*, expression, *e*, and property, *F*, *S* intends to refer to all and only *F*s with *e* if and only if *S* is disposed to conform her credences in the thoughts she expresses with sentences involving *e* to any information *S* has about the *F*s.

As before, we call the property, *F*, such that *S* intends to refer to all and only *F*s with *e*, 'the property *S* associates with *e*'.

Let us clarify Conformity by means of some examples. Assume that Ali intends to refer to all and only unmarried men with 'bachelor'. What this means, according to

Conformity, is that if Ali were to learn that Ben is an unmarried man, he would conform his credence in the thought, whatever it is, that he expresses with ‘Ben is a bachelor’ (henceforth simply “his credence in ‘Ben is a bachelor’”) to his credence that Ben is an unmarried man. Whatever Ali’s prior credence in ‘Ben is a bachelor’ was, it is now as high as his credence that Ben is an unmarried man.¹⁸ Similarly, if Ali were to learn that all unmarried men are untidy, he would conform his credence in ‘All bachelors are untidy’ to his credence that all unmarried men are untidy.

Consider also the following example. Assume that Carla associates ‘Gödel’ with *the person referred to as ‘Gödel’ in my linguistic community*, and learns that the person referred to as ‘Gödel’ in her linguistic community won the Einstein award in 1951. What this means, according to Conformity, is that Carla conforms her credence in ‘Gödel won the Einstein award in 1951’ to her credence that the person referred to as ‘Gödel’ in her linguistic community won the Einstein award in 1951—i.e., both of these credences are now equally high. Now assume, further, that Carla learns that the winner of the Einstein award in 1951 wore glasses. Given her high credence in ‘Gödel won the Einstein award in 1951’ and assuming, as usual, that she is rationally unimpaired, Carla also conforms her credence in ‘Gödel wore glasses’ to her credence that the winner of the Einstein award in 1951 wore glasses. Here, one might wonder whether this means, according to Conformity, that Carla also associates ‘Gödel’ with *winner of the Einstein award in 1951*. To see why it doesn’t, notice that Conformity entails that *S* associates *F* with *e* only if *S* adjusts the thoughts she expresses with sentences involving *e* (henceforth ‘*e*-thoughts’) to *any* information she has about the bearers of *F*. So, assume that if Carla were to learn that the winner of the Einstein award in 1951 *isn’t* the person referred to as ‘Gödel’ in her linguistic community, she would no longer conform her credences in ‘Gödel’-thoughts to information about the winner of the Einstein award in 1951. In this case, there is some piece of information that breaks the conformity between her credences in ‘Gödel’-thoughts and her credences in

¹⁸ We assume that these credences are exactly equal for the purposes of illustration. Strictly speaking, this needn’t be so, provided that Ali’s credence in ‘Ben is an unmarried man’ isn’t 1.

thoughts about the winner of the Einstein award in 1951, which implies that Carla doesn't associate *being the winner of the Einstein award in 1951* with 'Gödel'.

The preceding remarks should illustrate how Conformity is to be understood. Conformity yields a more precise notion of speaker intentions, one that we believe captures the spirit of descriptivism. On the resulting account, reference is explained by speaker dispositions that reflect connections between expressions in their idiolect and associated properties. Notice that, on our view, ordinary speakers needn't be able to articulate the patterns underlying these dispositions to adjust their beliefs—in other words, they needn't be aware of which properties they associate with which expressions. Hence, we can say that properties are implicitly associated with expressions—again in line with other descriptivist accounts (cf., e.g., Jackson (1998b, 211)). That being said, in many cases, these implicit associations are accompanied by “second-order” judgments about associated properties. So, for instance, Ali might be disposed to explicitly state that information about whether Ben is tidy isn't necessarily relevant to whether he is a bachelor, and that information about whether Ben is married and male is certainly relevant.

With these clarifications in place, let us turn to our refined argument for descriptivism. We will argue for SI and NI once again, this time assuming the interpretation of intentions provided by Conformity. On this interpretation, it will become apparent that the strategy of denying NI we considered on behalf of opponents of descriptivism in §2.2 is ultimately unsuccessful.

Let us first consider SI, with the following example. Assume that David intends to refer to the prover of the incompleteness theorems with 'Gödel'. By Conformity, David is thus disposed to conform his credences in his 'Gödel'-thoughts to whatever information he has about the bearers of the property *being the prover of the incompleteness theorems*. Someone who denies SI holds that it is possible that the reference of David's use of 'Gödel' isn't explained by his intentions, such that he might refer to something other than $\{x \mid x \text{ is the prover of the incompleteness theorems}\}$. So, assume that David's use of 'Gödel', along with his 'Gödel'-thoughts, refers not to Gödel but to someone who didn't prove the

incompleteness theorems. The following considerations illustrate that this assumption has highly counterintuitive consequences. Assume, for instance, that as David acquires more information about the prover of the incompleteness theorems, he becomes disposed to assent to sentences such as 'Gödel proved one of the most significant metamathematical results of the 20th century', 'Gödel published his incompleteness theorems in 1931', and 'Gödel's first incompleteness theorem concerns ω -consistent systems'. There is no possible piece of information David could get that would break this connection between his 'Gödel'-utterances and the property of being the prover of the incompleteness theorems. Moreover, if David has some awareness of his associated properties, he will explicitly state that by 'Gödel', he just means the prover of the incompleteness theorems. On the assumption at hand, all of the thoughts David thus expresses are false. But this doesn't seem credible. The reading of SI yielded by Conformity doesn't change the fact that denying this principle leads to a highly unattractive view on which we have no control over the meanings of our words.

Next, consider NI. Recall that this principle states that if there is some (external) relation, E , that putatively explains reference, then a speaker must have the intention to refer to the things to which they are E -related. On the reading of this claim provided by Conformity, this means that, in such a case, a speaker must be disposed to conform their credences to information about E . To see what a rejection of this principle would involve, let us consider two other examples. First, let us say that Ella's use of the name 'Gödel' is supposed to be explained by the fact that Gödel is the person at the origin of the causal chain leading to Ella's use of the name. Assume now that Ella isn't disposed to conform her credences to all information about the person who is at the origin of the causal chain leading to her usage. There are thus some pieces of information about the person who is at the origin of this causal chain to which Ella isn't disposed to conform her 'Gödel'-thoughts. For instance, let us say that Ella won't conform her credences to the information that the person at the origin of the causal chain leading to her use of 'Gödel' won the Einstein award in 1951. When she learns this, Ella doesn't conform her credence in 'Gödel won

the Einstein award in 1951', even though her rational capacities are unimpaired. Let us say that when she gets this information, her credence in the latter thought remains at 0.1, while her credence in the thought that the person at the origin of the causal chain leading to her usage of 'Gödel' is the person who won the Einstein award in 1951 is now close to 1. Assuming that Ella's second-order dispositions align with her dispositions to update her beliefs, Ella will also be disposed to say things such as "The fact that the person at the causal origin of my use of 'Gödel' won the Einstein award is irrelevant to whether *Gödel* won this award." Ella thus isn't disposed to conform her 'Gödel'-thoughts to information about the person that is causally related to her in this way. Assuming that Ella is rational, there seems to be no reason to think that in this case, Ella's use of the term is explained or determined by the relevant causal relations.

Next, consider the case of Fritz, who introduces the name 'Napoleon' for his pet aardvark. An opponent of NI might try to argue that Fritz could later lose the intention to comply with his original naming ceremony and still continue to refer to his aardvark by 'Napoleon', as long as he doesn't acquire any conflicting intentions. To illustrate why this view isn't tenable, let us assume that one day, Fritz learns that the aardvark he is currently taking for a walk isn't the one he once named 'Napoleon'. If Fritz then gives up his belief that he is currently walking Napoleon, this indicates that he still intends to comply with his original naming ceremony. If, on the other hand, he doesn't change his belief, this indicates that he treats information regarding the initial naming as irrelevant to the reference of his use of 'Napoleon'. In this case, the reference of 'Napoleon' in Fritz' idiolect has plausibly changed. This case brings us back to our discussion in §2.2. There, we mentioned that a seemingly promising strategy for an opponent of descriptivism is to deny NI by insisting that if a person doesn't have any intentions either way, reference can be explained by causal relations. As the example of Fritz illustrates, our more precise way of construing speaker intentions makes it apparent that this isn't a stable position. Generally speaking, the problem is this: If a speaker has a credence in a sentence and gets a piece of information, she will either adjust her credence in response to this information or

she won't—there seems to be no middle ground here. This implies that if a speaker doesn't conform her credences to a particular property, then she has dispositions that conflict with this property, since there are cases in which she treats some piece of information about the property as irrelevant to her beliefs. It would seem misleading to say that a subject is indifferent regarding the relevance of this property in such cases. In any case, we contend that reference cannot be explained by external relations if speakers have dispositions that are contrary to the relevance of these relations for reference. Conformity also allows us to deal with cases of apparently conflicting intentions. Whenever a conflict arises, the way the speaker updates their beliefs indicates what their intentions or associated descriptions in the relevant sense are. For instance, the fact that the patient in Burge's case abandons his belief that he has arthritis in his thigh when he is corrected by his doctor reveals that, in the relevant sense, he doesn't intend his 'arthritis' utterances to refer to whatever causes his thigh pain. Hence, in such cases, there is one, and only one, set of intentions in the sense given by Conformity, which means that these cases don't undermine NI.

Let us note that we believe that an even stronger case for NI can be made based on the fact that, on their readings given by Conformity, NI and NI* are plausibly equivalent. Here is a sketch of an argument for this claim, which we will make more precise in §4.2. In any case in which a speaker isn't disposed to conform their credences to a particular property, this speaker's dispositions follow some other pattern. On the liberal understanding of properties we have assumed, it is plausible that this pattern of dispositions tracks another property, which would mean that any speaker who doesn't intend to refer to all and only the things that have some property, F, intends to refer to the things that have some other property, G. If NI and NI* are indeed equivalent, this makes our argument for descriptivism even harder to resist. In any case, we saw that NI and SI are very plausible under their reading given by Conformity. This reading of NI and SI doesn't change the fact that these principles entail Descriptivism. (Since the form of the argument from §2.2 remains the same, we won't repeat it here.) Consequently, Descriptivism follows from very plausible principles.

4 Objections and replies

4.1 The Humpty Dumpty problem

Some philosophers have claimed that speakers cannot use words to mean anything they want them to mean. For instance, it might be, as Wittgenstein (1953, I.510) seems to suggest, that a speaker in a community of English speakers cannot mean *cold* by ‘warm’ in virtue of their intentions to do so. One might reject SI on the grounds that it implies that speakers can mean whatever they want to mean with any expression—a view often called ‘Humpty Dumptyism’.¹⁹

In our view, this worry is misguided. It is true that there are limits to what a speaker can *mean* with an expression in one sense of the word, i.e., there are limits to how they can use a word in a reasonable attempt to communicate. However, the theory that we and other descriptivists defend concerns what explains and determines the reference of expressions in a speaker’s idiolect, i.e., the reference of the concept that a speaker expresses with an expression. In our view, speakers can indeed refer to anything they would like with the words in their idiolects. Since speakers usually wish to coordinate their use with others—primarily to enable communicative success—their associations are usually approximately aligned with other speakers.²⁰ But none of this makes it impossible to mean whatever one wants with the expressions in one’s idiolect. Notice also that there is no indication that Kripke endorses any constraints on the reference of a speaker’s expressions. As, for instance, his case of someone naming their pet aardvark ‘Napoleon’ (cf. above) illustrates, Kripke allows reference-determination by speaker intentions that diverge significantly from public meaning.

All that being said, our argument for descriptivism doesn’t require us to reject the Humpty Dumpty objection. As we show in what follows, our argument can accommodate those who take the objection seriously. Assume that there are constraints on what speakers

¹⁹ MacKay (1968) was the first to appeal to Humpty Dumpty in this context.

²⁰ Kipper (2012, 109–168) discusses this issue in detail.

can refer to with their expressions. Let us capture these constraints by saying that reference can only be explained by *reasonable* speaker intentions, where reasonable intentions are of the kind involved, for instance, in Kripke's examples of 'Neptune' and 'Jack the Ripper', quoted above. Accordingly, one might say that speaker intentions can be unreasonable—and thus not suitable for explaining reference—if they diverge too much from public meaning. Beyond that, we leave it open here how exactly reasonableness is to be defined.²¹ We can then replace SI with the following principle, which we call 'SRI' for 'Sufficient Reasonable Intentions':

SRI For any speaker, *S*, and expression, *e*, if there is a property, *F*, such that *S* reasonably intends to refer to all and only *F*s with *e*, then *S* refers with *e* to the class, *C*, of all and only *F*s, and *S* refers to *C* with *e* because (i) *S* intends to refer to all and only *F*s with *e* and (ii) *C* is the class of all and only *F*s.

Unlike SI, SRI doesn't face the Humpty Dumpty worry. Now, what about NI? It would be strange to deny that the intentions referred to in NI are reasonable, in the above sense. After all, these intentions are in line with the reference of the relevant expressions, as construed by everyone in the debate, including externalists. These intentions are thus emphatically not of the kind involved in Wittgenstein's example. Let us make this insight explicit by modifying NI to NRI, for 'Necessary Reasonable Intentions':

NRI For any speaker, *S*, expression, *e*, and class, *C*, if there is some relation, *E*, between *S*, *e*, and *C*'s members, because of which *S* refers to *C* with *e*, then *S* reasonably intends to refer to all and only the things that are *E*-related to *e* and *S*.

Descriptivism then follows from SRI and NRI, with an argument parallel to the one in §2.2. An important point here is that on our characterization of descriptivism, associations explain the reference of an expression *if* the expression refers—our account doesn't entail that any speaker associations can ground reference. Thus, for those who are worried by

²¹ Michaelson (2013) proposes an account that involves such constraints.

the Humpty Dumpty objection, our argument for descriptivism in this paper can be taken to proceed from SRI and NRI instead of SI and NI.

4.2 The semantic argument against descriptivism

Kripke famously argued that there are cases in which speakers refer successfully despite the fact that they don't associate anything with the relevant expressions that could determine their reference (1980, 80–85). Kripke's so-called 'semantic argument' involves proper names, but other philosophers have given similar arguments regarding other kinds of expressions (e.g., Putnam (1975, 226)). If these highly influential arguments are sound, then there must be something wrong with our argument for the view that successful reference is always explained by speaker associations. It therefore seems appropriate to address these arguments here. However, since the case against them has been made in detail elsewhere, our discussion will be relatively brief.

Kripke argues that many speakers know nothing that would distinguish Feynman from Gell-Mann. Nevertheless, he contends, when they say 'Feynman', they refer to Feynman, and when they use the name 'Gell-Mann', they refer to Gell-Mann (Kripke 1980, 81). In other cases, Kripke claims, everything a speaker associates with a name is false. For instance, if the only thing someone believes about Einstein is that he invented the atomic bomb, they nevertheless refer to Einstein when they use the name 'Einstein' (Kripke 1980, 85). In a similar vein, Putnam claims that he has no way of distinguishing elms from beeches. Nevertheless, he contends, when he says 'elm', he refers to elms, and when he uses the word 'beech', he refers to beeches (Putnam 1975, 226). To see why these arguments aren't conclusive, it is important to remember that properties can be *implicitly* associated with an expression, which means that the first things that come to a speaker's mind when they hear an expression needn't reflect their associated properties. On the basis of this idea, it has been argued that Kripke, who only discussed highly salient features such as a person's "famous deeds," didn't consider the right kinds of properties. Instead, David Chalmers, Frank Jackson and others—drawing on a suggestion of Strawson

(1959, 182 fn. 1)—argue that the property associated with a name such as ‘Feynman’ can be construed along the following lines: *being the person called ‘Feynman’ by those from whom I acquired the name.*²² This proposal highlights that even speakers who know very little about Feynman and Gell-Mann know something that distinguishes them: they know that Feynman is called ‘Feynman’, and Gell-Mann is called ‘Gell-Mann’. The same kind of proposal can be applied to Putnam’s alleged inability to distinguish elms from beeches. Putnam does know, at least implicitly, that elms are called ‘elms’ and beeches are called ‘beeches’ in his linguistic community. Accordingly, the property he associates with ‘elm’ might be something like *being the species of trees called ‘elm’ in my linguistic community.* More generally, Jackson (1998b, 212; 2010, 113f.) has argued that the thought experiments devised by Kripke and others don’t undermine descriptivism, but instead provide evidence about the properties speakers associate with the relevant expressions.

The foregoing considerations show that even in so-called cases of ‘ignorance’ and ‘error’, the speakers do have implicit or explicit associations that are sufficient to determine reference. We believe that these kinds of associations are also plausibly associated properties in the descriptivist’s sense. The case for this claim has been made in detail elsewhere (e.g., (Jackson 1998b, 209–212), (Chalmers 2002, 170–173)), and we won’t reiterate it here. Let us point out, however, that—as was discussed in §2—Kripke and other externalists themselves hold that speakers must have intentions of this type, for instance, the intention to refer to the same person as those from whom they acquired the relevant term.

We just saw that Kripke’s semantic argument and other, similar arguments don’t show that there are cases of successful reference without associated properties, since, in all the relevant cases, there are plausible candidates for constituting the required speaker associations. In what follows, we present an argument for the stronger claim that associated properties are always present. This argument is based on a framework developed by Chalmers and Jackson (e.g., (Chalmers and Jackson 2001)). As we explain, the conclusion

²² Kripke (1980, 90) criticizes Strawson’s suggestion. However, as is explained in Kipper (2012, 88–92), his criticism is misguided.

of this argument entails that NI and NI* are equivalent, and thus further strengthens our case for descriptivism.

We start from the observation that, on any theory of linguistic competence and concept possession, a person who possesses a concept is disposed to update their beliefs involving this concept on some pieces of information. On our account, associated properties are those that a speaker updates on given *any* evidence. These properties can be identified as follows: Any competent speaker is disposed to make judgments about the extensions of their expressions given information—actual or hypothetical—about the world. For instance, given information about an object’s shape, composition, and function, they will be disposed to say ‘This is a chair’ or ‘This is not a chair’. If we abstract away from cognitive limitations, any speaker will also be disposed to make judgements about the extensions of their terms given complete information—or given all the relevant information—about a particular scenario.²³ Now, take an expression, *e*, and the set of actual and possible objects, *O*, across all scenarios that a speaker *S* is disposed to judge to fall under *e*. We suggest that *O* represents the property that *S* associates with *e* in our sense above. It should be noted that *O* can be “fuzzy” in the sense that for many possible objects, *S* isn’t clearly disposed to judge whether they fall under *e*. (Such cases should be taken to reflect vagueness.) Furthermore, *O* can be a highly unnatural, “gerrymandered,” property—in line with our liberal understanding of properties. Nevertheless, the existence of such a set—and hence, the existence of an associated property in our sense—is guaranteed by the fact that *S*, being a competent speaker, has dispositions to apply *e* to actual and hypothetical objects.

Drawing on Chalmers and Jackson’s framework, we have just sketched how associated properties can be determined, and argued that there is a property associated with every term in a competent speaker’s idiolect. By itself, this doesn’t show that these associated properties determine or explain reference. However, it entails that NI and NI* are equivalent, which strengthens our argument from §3: Recall that NI* states that if the reference of *S*’s expression *e* is explained by some relation, *E*, then a speaker doesn’t associate a

²³ Chalmers (2004) explains the notion of scenarios involved here in detail.

property distinct from *being E-related to e and S*. If competent speakers always associate some property, then whenever they don't associate a particular property, there is another property they associate. Hence, NI* implies NI, which means that descriptivism follows from SI and NI*. And, as we saw, both of these principles are very hard to deny.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we provided a novel argument for descriptivism that is based on very natural and common assumptions about the relevance of speaker intentions to reference. We then argued for an understanding of speaker intentions in terms of dispositions to conform one's beliefs to a property. This not only provides a fruitful explication of the notion of speaker intention for descriptivists, but also forecloses what we take to be the best way to reject the starting assumptions of our argument.

Although our paper was only concerned with descriptivism as a theory of reference, the view we have outlined can be used to develop a descriptivist theory of meaning, along the lines of (Jackson 1998b; 2004). Indeed, we take it to be highly plausible that at least one aspect of the meaning of an expression should be identified with the property associated with the expression, given that such properties determine reference and arguably capture much of the "cognitive significance" of an expression. Furthermore, there are other phenomena related to reference and meaning to which speaker intentions might be relevant. For instance, it has been argued that speaker intentions are crucial for explaining intentional identity in the case of empty names.²⁴ It might be worth investigating whether such views can be supported by arguments similar to the ones we have given here.

Finally, we don't expect that our argument for descriptivism will convince all of its critics. But the challenge for those who want to oppose descriptivism now is to state where exactly they disagree with highly plausible and widely accepted principles about the relevance of speaker intentions to reference, and to motivate their rejection. For, our

²⁴ Cf., e.g., recent proposals by Sandgren (2019) and García-Carpintero (2020).

argument shows that one cannot make such commonplace assumptions about speaker intentions without committing to descriptivism.²⁵

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²⁵ We are grateful to Paul Audi, Sharon Berry, Tom Donaldson, Frank Jackson, Matthew Maxwell, Daniel Waxman, to an audience at Cornell University, and to two anonymous reviewers for very helpful comments and suggestions.

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