Grant W. Smith
The symbolic meanings of names

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to broaden the general understanding of name meaning by emphasizing the importance of contextual associations and how language functions symbolically. Naming is the prototypical act of linguistic reference, and philosophers have commonly analyzed names as simple indices, i.e. as fixed, one-to-one designations of individual referents without lexical meaning. However, the natural use of human language is symbolic in which meaning is generated by the relationships among signs and referents.

This paper will argue that names carry symbolic meanings because of contextual associations in the minds of interpreters. In semiotic terms, their symbolic meanings are an inherent extension of their indexical function. In actual practice, the work of onomasts usually consists of recovering the symbolic meanings of names and describing how such references vary in use and form over time.

My procedure here is first to give an elementary review of typical philosophical analyses to clarify what I see as their limitations. I will then describe recent physiological studies of the brain and how they show images and words, including names, are found in clusters. I will argue that the understanding of a name depends on, and arises, not just from formal definitions or the actual attributes of any referent, but essentially from mental images associated with the referent.

Much like any other word, a name evokes a context of related associations, as well as a sense of designation, and the qualities shared by the related associations makes the meaning relational and thereby symbolic in semiotic terms. Only thereby is a name comprehensible within the individual's linguistic universe.

That is to say, the indexical function of a name is only one of its semiotic functions. Our understandings and uses of names depend on their contextual associations that give them symbolic values, and these associations vary among people and over time. We do not, in fact, understand the indexical reference without a set of contextual associations – even if the context is just a set of courthouse records.

I hope to illustrate this argument by describing, at least briefly, the results of two surveys that, not surprisingly, display wide variations in the interpretations of prominent place names. I will not be able to present a full analysis of these results here, but I pursued an elaboration at ICONN4 (see SMITH 2017).

2. Typical philosophical analyses

Most of us know the philosophical history of names, and so I beg your patience as I sketch some typical theories as a springboard for my differences. J. S. MILL set the modern basis for discussing name meaning by drawing a categorical distinction between common and proper nouns. Common nouns carry lexical meaning because their definitions specify sets of common attributes among all items in the class of things named – e.g. the word *dog* refers to a set of attributes shared by all examples within the class of things we call dogs. Proper nouns, such as *Fido,* do not carry lexical meaning because they refer to specific rather than common attributes; they designate individual items within a class and function grammatically much like demonstratives.

Thus, the communicative value of common and proper nouns is to be seen strictly in terms of their logical definitions. MILL emphatically dismisses any associations that might arise in an individual's mind as a part of meaning. Such associations, according to MILL, are merely incidental to the act of reference rather than vital to it: "By saying: This is York, [the listener may understand] that it contains a Minster. But this [is] by virtue of what he has previously heard concerning York, not by anything implied in the name" (MILL 1843/1973: 36).

In referring to *Fido,* we might think about his color or shagginess, but according to MILL, the name as a word does not specify those attributes as a part of its definition. The attributes are presumably irrelevant even though they must come to mind for the referent to be identified.

MILL's focus on formal definitions ignores some simple observations. As I hope to show, specific associations are in fact necessary in evoking recognition and in distinguishing between different referents similarly named. That is to say, the name *Fido* evokes no meaningful reference whatsoever, indexical or otherwise, without also evoking some pre-existing images already associated with the referent.

Which *Fido* are we referring to?

Figure 1: *FIDO* and *FIDO*

3. Since Mill

Since the time of Mill, two general types of philosophical theories have emerged about names and meaning. These are usually referred to as descriptive and causal theories of names. The descriptive theories emerged first to argue that names carry connotative as well as denotative values in their meanings, partially accounting thereby for the associated images that I believe are evoked by names. Among the descriptive theories, two types are most important, those of Frege and Russell.

G. Frege (1848–1925) is especially significant among those who have argued that names carry descriptive values as a part of their meaning. He begins with the simple observation that two names for the same referent carry what he calls a different sense while making the same reference. Using the name *Mark Twain,* for example, is not the same as using *Samuel Clemens.* Frege concludes that names clearly denote individual entities apart from classes of things, which he calls their reference, but in addition they also carry connotations derived from contextual associations, which he calls their sense (1892/1970).

Thus, Frege recognizes both denotation and connotations as vital aspects of name meaning, but he denies the value of subjective interpretations that vary from person to person. The sense of a word, according to Frege, has significance only insofar as its context is verifiable. For example, fictitious names, such as *Santa Claus,* carry meaning in terms of sense because the contextual associations can be verified among examples of language used

within a linguistic community, even though the name does not make reference to a real entity.

In denying the significance of subjective variations, Frege places strict emphasis on the logical structure of language and neglects the imperfect sharing of contextual associations between addressors and addressees, upon which human communication depends.

I believe that the recognition of a referent depends on the images associated with the referent by the individual, that associations vary at least a little from person to person, and that the degree to which these associations are shared by addressors and addressees determines the communicative efficacy of a name, especially when one name can be used for two different referents. There are many examples in our daily lives, and in the results of my two surveys.

B. Russell (1872–1970) rejected Frege's distinction between sense and reference in order to place even more emphasis on logical analysis. He theorized that names are, in fact, abbreviated forms of logical propositions.

The statements, "The present King of France is bald," and "The present King of France is not bald," are both false because the reference is false. That is to say, the reference, "the present King of France," is an abbreviation of the proposition, "This man is the present King of France," and such a proposition is obviously false. There is no man, either bald or not bald, who might be described as the "present King of France." Russell focuses here on the act of reference and is using a descriptive phrase as a name, as we often see in Amerindian languages.

Russell thereby claims that names "have no meaning in isolation" (1905: 118) but convey definite descriptive meanings implied by their contexts within a world that is knowable, verifiable, and subject to logical analysis. It follows that their meanings are not at all subject to the variations of personal interpretations. We can and should judge them as true or false in terms of their demonstrable contexts and/or formal structures, i.e. whether they are fictitious (e.g. *Santa Claus*) and/or conceptually consistent (e.g. *the Theory of Relativity*).

Russell is happy to point out that denials of false propositions are true, such as, "Santa Claus is not a real person." At the same time, two referents with the same name may be both true, but Russell does not explain how two such referent are distinguished, one from the other, by the addresser or addressee. To what does the name *Fido* refer?
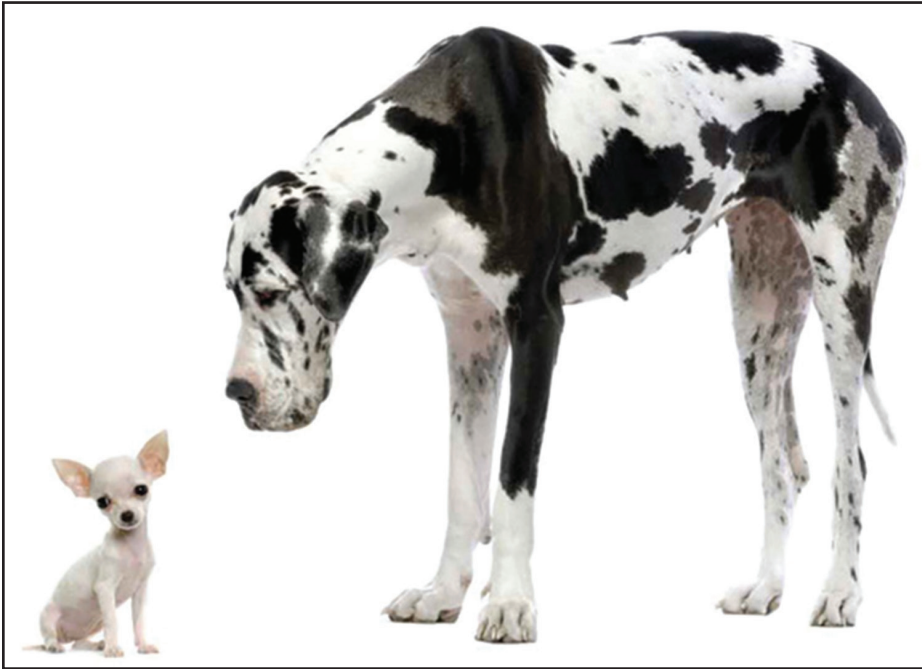
Figure 2: *FIDO* and *FIDO*

FREGE and RUSSELL, as well as other descriptive theorists (e.g. J. R. SEARLE, 1983), argue well for a contextual basis of name meaning, but dismiss subjective variations. They focus primarily on the logical structure of language, in and of itself, and neglect what may be actually evoked in the minds of different people.

4. Causal theories of name meaning

Most current philosophers have abandoned descriptive theories of reference epitomized by FREGE and RUSSELL. They emphasize instead causal theories of reference that are propelled by the writings of SAUL KRIPKE (beginning with his lectures at Princeton and published as Naming and Necessity, 1972 and 1980).

According to causal theories, we need not be acquainted with a propositional context of an entity, as posited by RUSSELL, in order to use a name correctly. One only needs to use a name in a way that correctly identifies the entity in question, and in order to do so, one's use of a name need only be a link in a chain of uses following the cause of the name, i.e. the dubbing.

For example, when a child is born, the parents may say simply, "we'll call him Jacob," and give no explicit reason, assuming merely the acceptability of the name. The meaning and reasons for the name, even though they exist, are not needed for the name to be used effectively by family, friends, teachers, and

record keepers. Also, once a name is given, its reference is fixed for all users unless formal action changes it. According to KRIPKE, names do not vary in their reference because of their connotations but are rigid designators within a given and reasonably static linguistic community.

5. Some empirical observations

Philosophical analysis helps to clarify logical categories, but simple observation will detect little logic in how the human brain actually processes language. Recent research has shown that the brain processes all words in varied patterns depending on where they are stored in the brain. All words exist in our brains alongside many other words linked to images imprinted there from previous experience and reinforced by conversations, reading, various media, and word play.

Using MRIs and charting blood flow, scientists have found that word recognition is distributed in clusters across the cerebral cortex and in many different areas that span both hemispheres of the brain (HUTH et. al. 2016). Furthermore, the clusters represent types of meaning. For example, words associated with people are generally clustered in one area of the brain, words associated with places are clustered in another, and the types of clustering vary from person to person.

Interpretations are therefore colored by nearby words and images in the same brain area, the types of coloring vary from person to person, and the clusters vary over time because additional experiences provide new types of reinforcement. Of course, common experience shows our dependence on associated words and images in recalling names.

6. Semiotic theory

These empirical observations are generally consistent with semiotic theory. Over a century ago, C. S. PEIRCE used the terms icon, index, and symbol to describe the types of interpretations and the formal relationships between signs and images evoked in acts of reference (in selected publications, 1897–1910).

An icon "is like that thing and used as a sign of it" (PEIRCE 102); it is a sign that represents something else on the basis of similarity, as a photo or map resembles that to which it refers. By resembling something, an icon brings that something to mind in the form of an idea. If a bird looks at a moth colored the same as the bark of the tree on which it sits, the bird might think of bark, and the moth will be safe.

An index, by contrast, "is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object" (PEIRCE 102). It suggests a strict one-to-one relationship based on contiguity or correlation, as smoke indicates fire, or a thermometer indicates temperature. An indexical interpretation infers a connection between two iconic recognitions. If the bird sees movement, it will associate movement with food, and the moth will be eaten.

A symbolic interpretation compounds the complexity. It infers a relationship between two or more indices and evokes a quality or set of qualities shared by the entities referred to. If a name, for example, refers both to a person and to an occupation or habitat at the same time, the qualities partially shared by the two referents become an idea, and meaning is partially transferred, much as meaning is partially transferred between the vehicle of a metaphor and its tenor (see BLACK 1962: 38–47), and as illustrated in the following diagram.
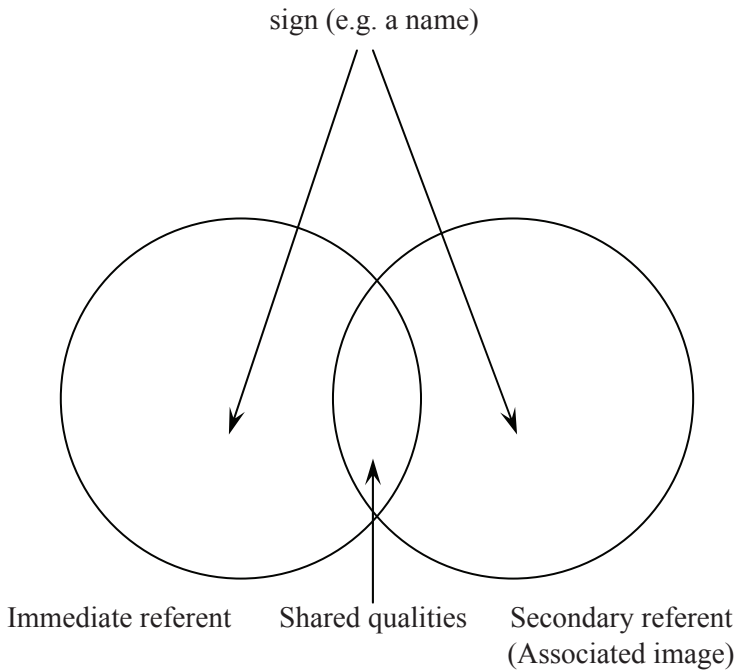
sign (e.g. a name)

Immediate referent   Shared qualities   Secondary referent
                                                      (Associated image)

Figure 3: Symbolic meaning

Of course, words functioning as signs often come together in discourse, and so a diagram should look more like this:
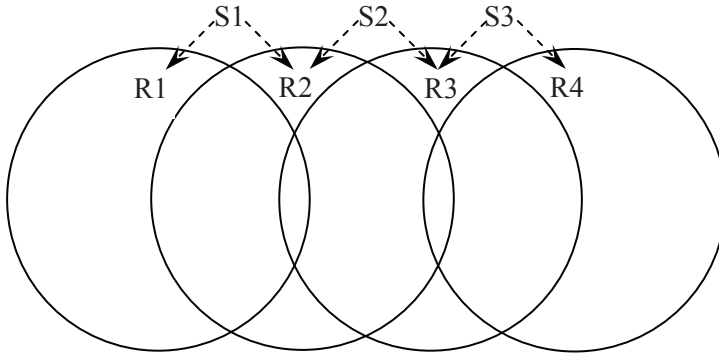
Figure 4: A Diagram of Symbolic Discourse

The hypothetical signs, S1, S2, and S3, refer to two or more hypothetical referents. The circles represent a variable range of attributes of the referents R1, R2, R3, and R$. The referents are thereby understood in terms of one another, and the meaning is relational, i.e. symbolic, rather than causal.

The symbolic interpretation of words is an elemental feature of human thought because of their clustered storage in the brain and the rules imposed on their combination (phonological, morphological, and syntactical). An undetermined array of words and references can be correlated by the rules of language and can thereby evoke widely differing interpretations.

Such interpretations may, of course, correlate very little, or not at all, with reality, as we can see with such words as *unicorn, griffin,* and *vampire.* Thus, the human mind revels with symbolic references, especially in our fantasies, and language is essentially symbolic insofar as it implies a system of ordered relationships "among the infinite array of possible indexical references" (SMITH 2006: 14). According to PEIRCE, this complexity is heightened by the fact that signs may be interpreted iconically, indexically, and symbolically at the same time.

J. S. MILL was correct in identifying denotation, the indexical designation of physical or conceptual entities, as an assumed function of a name (as soon as the word is recognized as a name grammatically), but he was wrong to dismiss the varied associations that actually enable an addressee to recall a referent within a mental universe of words and experiences.

For many addressees the reference of the word *York* is located in the brain only if it has an association with a "minster." There are many *Yorks,* and a communication cannot succeed unless the addressor and the addressee share some, but not necessarily all, of the same associations that can be evoked by the word. Many addressees in America would have no idea what MILL refers

to as *York*. Similarly, many here or around the world would have no idea what I might refer to as *Spokane,* the city where most of my students live and work, without my supplying more context, doing my best, of course, to use images understood by the audience.

Furthermore, whatever context I supply will be incomplete, limited to a selection of my own associations, and only partially recorded and stored in the brain of any addressee. At the same time, a name that evokes multiple associations will suggest a relationship of qualities shared by those associations, and insofar as the qualities are shared, the meaning is relational and symbolic, rather than just indexical – or simply part of a causal chain.

For example, the Golden Gate Bridge, linking the city of San Francisco to Marin County, is literally descriptive as well as symbolic. It spans a gateway to the vast Pacific Ocean and glistens in the golden sun. It is not made of gold, but it certainly suggests value to the economy of the San Francisco Bay area. More importantly, the name associates the bridge with the state motto and, above all, with state history and the great gold rush of 1849. Thus, the name not only designates a particular bridge, but also associates it with other contexts in which the word is used.

7. A description of procedures for two surveys

To illustrate the ways in which people recognize the referent of a name with different contextual associations, I asked students in two of my classes to respond to nearby place names in two separate surveys.

In one survey 79 students were asked to state what comes to mind with the word *Spokane. Spokane* is the name of the nearby city (pop. 210,000) where most students work and live and with which they are very familiar. Responders generally assumed the location of the city and proceeded to identify the referent with contextual associations.

In a second survey 28 students were asked to state what comes to mind with the word *Vancouver,* the name for two cities, each about 500 km away from our university, and about 500 km apart from one another. The larger one (pop. 631,500) is just north of the border in Canada, and the other (pop. 161,800) is to the south across the Columbia River from Portland, Oregon.

Again, the responders identified one city or both with widely differing associations. Ten responders focused exclusively on the city in Canada, seven exclusively on the U.S. city to the south, six gave no indication of which referent, and five (18%) clearly indicated the two possible referents.

8. Conclusion

The responses to these surveys revealed little uniformity in the contextual associations cited by these responders. Although there was enough similarity to suggest that the respondents thought of the names as designating something, the responses were highly varied and emphasized personal experience in thinking about or even locating the referent.

The responses may give us much to debate, but I believe they show name meaning arises more from the contextual associations among words than from logical definitions or from the scientific attributes of the referents. Names always have an indexical function, but our understandings and uses of them depend on their contextual associations in a fundamental and crucial way.

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Abstract

J. S. Mill and, more recently, S. Kripke have argued that names should be interpreted as simple indices, i.e. as fixed, one-to-one designations of individual referents. This paper argues that the natural use of human language is fundamentally symbolic, and will describe a more inclusive and empirical basis for name meaning. Recent biological research has shown that all words are stored in various areas of the brain along with words of similar relevance to previous experience. Thus, all words, including names, are related to other words as much as they are to the objective phenomena of human experience. As described by C. S. Peirce, symbolic meaning arises when a word, or any other type of sign, evokes a mental awareness of two or more referents. The meaning is symbolic insofar as it lies in the relationship of the referents rather than in a single referent. Names can be used and analyzed as simple indices, but if a name evokes an image recorded in the human brain, it is ineluctably associated with other images giving it a relational meaning and symbolic value. Two surveys will be cited that illustrate the variability of contextual associations in the meanings of names.

Keywords: Contextual Associations, Relational v Causal Reference, Semiotic, Indexical, Symbolic, Fixed Designations, Denotation v Connotation