



Are Cantonese-speakers really descriptivists? Revisiting cross-cultural semantics

Barry Lam *

Department of Philosophy, Vassar College, Box 55, 124 Raymond Ave., Poughkeepsie, NY 12604, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 May 2009

Revised 15 December 2009

Accepted 22 December 2009

Keywords:

Semantic intuitions

Proper names

Reference

Truth-values

Cultural differences

Cantonese-speakers

English-speakers

Kripke

Causal-historical theory

Descriptivism

Philosophical methodology

ABSTRACT

In an article in *Cognition* [Machery, E., Mallon, R., Nichols, S., & Stich, S. (2004). Semantics cross-cultural style. *Cognition*, 92, B1–B12] present data which purports to show that East Asian Cantonese-speakers tend to have descriptivist intuitions about the referents of proper names, while Western English-speakers tend to have causal-historical intuitions about proper names. Machery et al. take this finding to support the view that some intuitions, the universality of which they claim is central to philosophical theories, vary according to cultural background. Machery et al. conclude from their findings that the philosophical methodology of consulting intuitions about hypothetical cases is flawed vis a vis the goal of determining truths about some philosophical domains like philosophical semantics.

In the following study, three new vignettes in English were given to Western native English-speakers, and Cantonese translations were given to native Cantonese-speaking immigrants from a Cantonese community in Southern California. For all three vignettes, questions were given to elicit intuitions about the referent of a proper name and the truth-value of an uttered sentence containing a proper name. The results from this study reveal that East Asian Cantonese-speakers do not differ from Western English-speakers in ways that support Machery et al.'s conclusions. This new data concerning the intuitions of Cantonese-speakers raises questions about whether cross-cultural variation in answers to questions on certain vignettes reveal genuine differences in intuitions, or whether such differences stem from non-intuitional differences, such as differences in linguistic competence.

© 2009 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In an article in *Cognition*, Machery, Mallon, Nichols, & Stich (2004) present data suggesting that “East Asians” tend to have descriptivist intuitions about the referents of proper names, whereas “Westerners” tend to have causal-historical, or “Kripkean” intuitions. Machery et al. take this finding to support the view that some intuitions, the universality of which they claim is central to philosophical theories, vary according to cultural background. Machery et al. hypothesize that the differences in intuitions stem from general psy-

chological differences between Eastern and Western subjects of the type noticed in cultural psychology (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Nisbett & Miyamoto, 2005). From these findings, Machery et al. conclude that the philosophical methodology of consulting intuitions about hypothetical cases is flawed. To quote Machery et al. “our data indicate that philosophers must radically revise their methodology” because “the intuitions philosophers pronounce from their armchairs are likely to be a product of their own culture and their academic training” (Machery et al., 2004, pp. B9). “The evidence suggests that it is wrong for philosophers to assume a priori the universality of their own semantic intuitions” (Machery et al., 2004, pp. B8). More recent work develops this line of critique against philosophical

* Tel.: +1 845 437 5528.

E-mail address: balam@vassar.edu

methodology and philosophical positions that are based on semantic intuitions. (Mallon, Machery, Nichols, & Stich, 2009; Machery, Olivola, & Blanc, 2009).

In the following study, I present data incompatible with Machery et al.'s conclusions. Native Cantonese-speaking immigrants from a Cantonese immigrant community in Southern California do not have descriptivist intuitions about the referents of proper names when presented with a Cantonese story and Cantonese questions about reference and truth-value. This data raises questions about whether cross-cultural variation in answers to questions on certain vignettes reveal genuine differences in intuitions, or whether differences in answers stem from non-intuitional differences, such as differences in linguistic competence. Together with Machery et al.'s original results, my results suggest neither a vindication nor a refutation of philosophical methodology. Instead, more work must be done to investigate the differences that choice of language, vignettes, and phrasing of questions make to the intuitions elicited, and whether such differences in fact refute philosophical methodology.

1.1. *The original study*

Saul Kripke famously argued that the referent of a proper name is not fixed by the set of definite descriptions a speaker or community associates with it (Kripke, 1980). Kripke's argument rests on a series of hypothetical examples in which a certain speaker *S* associates a description *D* with a name *N*, the description *D* is either true of a person *p*, or is true of no one, while *N* is causally and historically taken by a community of speakers to be the name of a person *p'*. In such a case, philosophers and most English-speakers intuitively take *S*'s use of the name *N* in a sentence to be referring to someone, namely *p'*, and not *p*. Thus, it appears that the referent of a name is the thing it is causally and historically taken to name, not the thing that fits a definite description associated with the name. Kripke did not appear to many philosophers to be making essential use of the fact that he was discussing English, and consulting the intuitions of English-speakers about English names. It therefore appeared to many philosophers that Kripke's arguments about the reference of names generalized to proper names in all natural languages. Questioning the generality of Kripke's claims about reference, Machery et al. report that Western participants from Rutgers University and Chinese participants from the University of Hong Kong have different intuitions about the referent of a name when both are presented with stories and questions in English concerning uses of that name. The following is Machery et al.'s primary probe concerning the name "Gödel", which they adapt from Kripke:

Suppose that John has learned in college that Gödel is the man who proved an important mathematical theorem, called the incompleteness of arithmetic. John is quite good at mathematics and he can give an accurate statement of the incompleteness theorem, which he attributes to Gödel as the discoverer. But this is the only thing that he has heard about Gödel. Now suppose that Gödel was not the author of this theorem. A man called

"Schmidt", whose body was found in Vienna under mysterious circumstances many years ago, actually did the work in question. His friend Gödel somehow got hold of the manuscript and claimed credit for the work, which was thereafter attributed to Gödel. Thus, he has been known as the man who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic. Most people who have heard the name "Gödel" are like John; the claim that Gödel discovered the incompleteness theorem is the only thing they have ever heard about Gödel.

When John uses the name "Gödel", is he talking about:

- (A) the person who really discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic? or
- (B) the person who got hold of the manuscript and claimed credit for the work? (Machery et al., 2004, pp. B6)

Machery et al. report that Cantonese-speakers are likely to answer the question consistent with a descriptivist view about proper names, namely, answer A, whereas English-speaking "Westerners" are likely to answer the question consistent with causal-historical views about proper names, namely answer B. Thus, Machery et al. conclude that there is support for the idea that intuitions about reference differ according to culture. Therefore, a methodology for determining facts about reference which relies on intuitions about reference is dubious, since such a methodology will present culturally-relative judgments as accurate data points for a theory of reference. Machery et al. conclude that Kripke, in giving Gödel-type cases as his original motivation for his theory of reference for proper names, relied on this flawed methodology.

1.2. *A gap in the critique of Kripkean methodology*

Let us take for granted, following Machery et al., that ordinary speaker intuitions about Gödel-type cases are central to Kripke's argument against descriptivism. While Kripke did not appear to make essential use of the fact that he was a "Westerner" speaking and arguing about English names in English, this presumption is precisely what Machery et al. seem to be questioning in their study. The most straightforward way of questioning this presumption would be to show that such a methodology fails to successfully generalize, because suitably generalized, the methodology generates results inconsistent with Kripke's. The most natural generalization of Kripke's methodology is to test Kripke's theory of reference as a theory of Cantonese (or Mohawk or Swahili) names by asking native Cantonese (or Mohawk or Swahili) speakers in their native-languages about the referents of Cantonese (or Mohawk or Swahili) names when used by Cantonese (or Mohawk or Swahili) speakers in hypothetical cases.¹ There is, then, a gap in Machery et al.'s original study. Cross-cultural differences resulting from a study of intuitions wholly in English admit

¹ There was one case in the original Machery et al. study which used an English transcription of a Chinese name, "Thu Ch'ung Chich". The probe was still done in English.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/927004>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/927004>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)