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EMPTY NAMES AND ‘GAPPY’ PROPOSITIONS

ABSTRACT. In recent years a number of authors sympathetic to Referentialist accounts of proper names have argued that utterances containing empty names express ‘gappy,’ or incomplete, propositions. In this paper I want to take issue with this suggestion. In particular, I argue versions of this approach developed by David Braun, Nathan Salmon, Ken Taylor, and by Fred Adams, Gary Fuller, and Robert Stecker.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years a number of authors sympathetic to Referentialist accounts of proper names have argued that utterances containing empty names, names which fail to refer, express ‘gappy,’ or incomplete, propositions.¹ In this paper I want to take issue with this suggestion. I begin by sketching the motivations for holding such a view in section 2. In section 3, I argue against the version of this approach developed by David Braun. In section 4, I argue against the version of this approach developed by Nathan Salmon. Then in section 5, I argue against the pragmatic approach developed by Ken Taylor, and by Fred Adams, Gary Fuller, and Robert Stecker. I shall not be concerned with developing an alternative account of the semantics of empty names here, though I sketch such an account in my (Everett, 2000).

2. THE PROBLEM FOR REFERENTIALISM

Suppose that, intending them to be literal claims about the world, I utter the sentences:

(1) Santa Claus does not exist.
(2) Father Christmas does not exist.
(3) Hamlet does not exist.
It is intuitively reasonable, I think, to suppose that all three utterances are true. Moreover, intuitively, it seems that when I uttered (1) and (2) I said the same thing but that when I utter (3) I am saying something different. In other words, it seems that my utterances of (1) and (2) express the same propositional content while my utterance of (3) expresses a different propositional content. These intuitions seem to be very widespread and very robust. And any acceptable account of empty names will either have to accommodate them, or explain them away.2

A Referentialist view of proper names holds that the sole semantic function of a proper name is to refer to its bearer. More precisely, Referentialists hold that the contribution which a proper name makes to the truth conditions of the utterances in which it occurs is that name’s bearer. Referentialists also typically accept a Russellian view of propositions. On this view the proposition expressed by an utterance containing a proper name is a structured entity which contains the bearer of that name as a constituent.3 And the proposition expressed by an utterance can be represented by an ordered n-tuple of the objects, properties, and relations, which that utterance is about. There is some room for variation concerning precisely how we choose to implement this latter thought. Typically, a proper name is taken to contribute its bearer to the n-tuples representing the content of those utterances in which tokens of that name occur. In a similar way, an occurrence of a predicate is taken to contribute the property or condition it expresses to the relevant n-tuples. And so on. Thus we may represent the propositional content of an utterance of “John is Green” by the ordered pair containing John and the property of being green:

< John, being-green >.

We might represent this propositional content in other ways, however. For example, in his (Braun, 1993) Braun suggests a slightly different way of using n-tuples to represent propositions on which a token of a name contributes the singleton of its referent to the n-tuple. This does not, however, amount to a different view of the semantic content of proper names. It is simply a different suggestion concerning how we should represent that content. Braun represents the propositional content of an utterance of “John is Green” as:

< {John}, being-green >.