HOW TO USE PROPER NAMES*

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David Kaplan has called the treatment of singular terms "a theoretician's nightmare". Indeed, the actual use of proper names, definite descriptions and pronouns raises a multitude of tricky problems. In my opinion, however, these are not to be handled by the philosopher but left to the linguist who is the competent scientist in that particular domain. According to my view of relativized transcendentalism, the philosopher's work does not primarily consist in describing or explaining factual regularities observed in linguistic behavior; it is rather directed to normative matters concerning optimal methods for the construction of adequate language systems with regard to specific aims. As a consequence I reject any purely descriptive attitude toward semantics. With Wittgenstein I share the conviction that meaning is strongly tied to use, while I disagree with his claim that natural language should be taken as it is and not be tampered with. I insist on the necessity of devising strictly regimented linguistic systems for the purpose, among others, of formulating precise scientific theories. I also object to the usual equation of expressions with tokens as physical objects, for linguistic expressions as such are not to be found in nature; they must rather be regarded as artifacts, i.e. as abstract entities we have ourselves created in order to make communication possible. For this reason the philosopher cannot consider semantics as an empirical enterprise dealing with objectively given relations between a language and the world. Quine himself concedes that there is no (physical) fact of the matter and

* I dedicate this piece of work to Jaakko Hintikka whom I consider as a major influence in nearly all domains of contemporary philosophy.

declares reference to be inscrutable. His well known theses concerning semantic indeterminacies are a consequence of his naturalism which tolerates exclusively behavioristic procedures and thus reduces linguistic phenomena to dispositions to respond to stimuli. I readily admit that reference cannot be objectively determined on empirical grounds, yet I do not bother since I do not believe that it is my task to elaborate a theory dealing with regularities in the factual use of words and tested with help of behavioral evidence. Instead I turn my attention to the rules which prescribe a practically successful use of singular terms.

1. The general view on language

A vision often (tacitly) taken for granted is that of language as a universal medium out of which we cannot step in order to describe its relation to the world from a neutral vantage point. In contrast to such a view I take an instrumental stance, according to which we do not have just one amorphous whole but create a multiplicity of distinct linguistic systems put to different uses. In accord with the usual methods of formal semantics, I lay much weight on the interpretation of such systems which is rendered possible by ascent to a metalanguage. The decisive point is that a linguistic system, whenever it is employed for a particular purpose, gets interpreted by adopting rules which will govern the correct use of all the expressions occurring in it. In relativizing their meaning, i.e. their intension and their extension, to specific contexts, I proceed in a way akin to model theory, where the interpretation is achieved through so-called models with different universes of discourse and accordingly differing referential relations. Thus I can use Tarski’s definition of truth which, in contrast to Quine’s holophrastic, pre-theoretic one, requires a relativization to a given language and a prior settlement of referential questions. Thus truth becomes a purely internal matter to be decided within a context with fixed

2. For details cf. Jaakko Hintikka, “Quine as a Member of the Tradition of the Universality of Language”, in Perspectives on Quine, edited by R. Barrett and R. Gibson, Massachusetts, 1990, pp. 159-76.