Pragmatism and reference. DAVID BOERSEMA. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts
    Institute of Technology, 2008. xi, 278

The nine chapters that constitute this remarkable book provide a thorough application of

pragmatic philosophical thought to the question of reference in language. The starting point in

the discussion is Bertrand Russell's view that, in the words of the author, "names are disguised

definite descriptions" (1), i.e., the descriptivist account, and the assumption that for reference to

occur, the underlying description must satisfy truth conditions for the object named, and which

thus holds that a description may be substituted for a name. This notion still populates

introductory texts in semantics today. Against this notion John Searle's and Saul Kripke's views

about the so-called cluster account, implying a cluster of descriptions, are developed and

contrasted. Reference borrowing, a feature of the causal account, it could be pointed out,

involves a social process, i.e., one that could lead to the conventionality of the term, regardless of

the truth value. A good example of this is *Sophist*, whose present conventional referent is not at

all true of the historical movement "named" by the term. Consistent with Peirce's semiotic

system, this process is just how signs become symbolic.

Much of the long argument in Searle and Kripke about the cluster and causal accounts

that is developed in Chapter 2 involves the shadow of the third leg of Peirce's semiotics, the

significant. It is this element that stands like Janus between Saussure's *langue* and *parole*. It has

been said that the receiving directions to a hitherto unknown location is proof that language

works, "language exists only to send us back ... to what it is not, that is, to non-linguistic reality"

(Mounin, 1985: 9). Names refer to their objects for the *significant* who hears them and, having

done so, finds the destination. It can be added that an erroneous use of a name changes neither

the name (Peirce's *signifier*) nor its referent (Peirce's *signified*) in the language, as is exemplified

in a father's continual failure to spit out the name of the intended son without going through the list of all his sons names.

Some questions posed by the author along these lines (246, n.5), will be taken up here. The signs in Peirce's semiotics do "have a status independent of each of us" (ibid.), in the same manner that items that have made their way into dictionaries have a status independent of those who are not familiar with. "'Max the Wonder Dog'" remains merely a "complex-sounding name" (ibid.); witness Rex the Wonder Dog, the nickname given Rex Hudler, former major league baseball player and Angels baseball team announcer. Names need not be recognizable as such upon hearing. In Chinese, surnames also serve as lexemes in the language, e.g., 夏 *xia* 'summer'; recognizing these items as names involves a combination of language acquisition and cultural knowledge. Similarly, hypocoristics and toponyms may not be recognizable as names at first contact, e.g., *The Hit Man* (= boxer Thomas Hearns), *Colorado* (= a certain movie cowboy), and *Minnesota Fats* (= legendary pocket billiards player [toponym + hypocoristic]), before acquisition occurs, but they nonetheless serve as names.

Peirce' semiotic system involves an extensive process of induction. A real life example will serve: A 20-month-old child worked out from indications in her environment that *auntie* refers to the adult woman in the house where her mother was making an extended visit, and *uncle* to the adult male (i.e., the association was existential), and the child refers to them as such; later another adult couple came to visit, and were also introduced to her as *uncle and auntie*. In response the child exclaimed, "No," while pointing to a photograph of the adult male and female in the house, and stated, "*This* is uncle and auntie!" She had not apprehended enough tokens for acquisition of *uncle* and *auntie* as symbols indicating the respective categories ('adult siblings of parent / adult friends') to occur for her.

A name "take[s] on the status of a Symbol" (ibid.) when the referent becomes a category (i.e., of things that can be so named in the language, e.g., *table* vs. *stand*, or *desk*) as opposed to the specified named object in connection with which we first encounter it. Likewise, second language research shows that learners cognize particular locations, such as a favorite beach resort, as the they acquire *vacation*. This would seem to ring the bell on the causal account and its 'rigid designators'.

Dewey's comment that the "'terminological status'" of terms is "open for future determination" (cited 81) is entirely consistent with Saussure's notion of the intersection of diachronicity and synchronicity in language (1906). The interesting example cited ,of the Cleveland Browns playing a game against the Baltimore Ravens (several years earlier the Browns had been moved to Baltimore and renamed the Ravens, while a new franchise began in Cleveland and took the old name, the Browns) refutes the 'rigid designator' principle (196).

What this also shows is that words do not necessarily mean what they used to mean, they mean what they mean now. Witness the lexical travels of *gay*: 'light and happy' → 'homosexual (n. and adj.)' → 'adj. of disparagement'. This is relevant also to Dewey's criticism of notions involving "'pointing,'" and "'ostensive definitions'" that seem to presuppose that "somewhere in the cosmos there must exist a good, hard fact to go with the name" (cited 88), as any linguistic item, at any given time, is the outcome of continuing social negotiation and regulation. By citing Dewey to wrap up the chapters that relate the descriptive theory, the cluster account, and the causal account of reference to Pragmatics and linguistic thought, Boersema foregrounds the view that recognizes in language a social construct, with recourse to principles of language and its use in contexts and situations.

Elgin's remark, "Individuation depends on schematization" (cited 112), seems *contra* Peirce's position that signs function indexically at first contact, before becoming symbolic (65 f). The principle of induction that accounts for our faculty to acquire language systems tells us that acquiring the category results from contacting enough particularities, i.e., what takes form in our cognition as schema are the products of apprehending particularities severally. To wit, infants and toddlers in English-speaking environments are not given explicit instruction in the supply of voiced or voiceless (-s) plural and third person morphemes, i.e., the acquisition process is not deductive or abductive, but the acquire the 'rule' inductively. Likewise, the existence of a lexical category is a cognitive construct developed after contacting enough particularities to give it shape and delimit it from others (recalling the previous example, of what we call *table* and what we call *stand*). Once the category has been acquired, of course, we have recourse to it as such as we cognize and linguistically process new particularities, and at this stage of the process the above remark of Elgin's has bearing.

Perhaps not obvious enough about the views of Kripke and Searle and the overall discussion is a degree of terminological ambiguity in names, as so-called proper nouns, i.e., the names of persons and places, i.e., species of only one sample, and common nouns, which name categories of things, masses, and abstractions (see Bloomfield, 1933) both enter into the discussion**.** For much of the discussion in this text *names* seems to indicate 'proper nouns', but in numerous spots, e.g., the discussion of Eco (135) on the '"names of things"' and Peirce on '"abduction"' (139 f), 'common nouns' and verbs are used as examples. This underscores the reality that language philosophers think about philosophical problems in language, often resorting to syllogistic or formal logic for their solution, albeit, at the expense of the principles of language to which they apply.

The point in the parenthetical note that recognizes that natural languages vary in how they refer to events and things (176) is sound, but better evidence is needed than Whorf's remarks about Hopi, which no linguist I know of today subscribes to. Classifier languages do treat events and things differently, e.g., in English we can *make three shots*, but in Chinese it is more natural to say *shoot (in) three times*. Furthermore, in classifier languages bare nouns signify the category or mass (see, e.g., Dobson, 1959), but require some syntactic arrangement, such as a classifier or determiner (or context) to specify a particularity. This point is pertinent to the important distinction between particularities and categories in the semantic system of languages of different types. Thus it is not the *nature* of signs that is at issue here, but the question of how diverse language systems *utilize* them. This touches on the broader point that language philosophers, like any other speaker of a language, have formed intuitions about their native tongue and its systems, which inform their reflections on *language* in the abstract.

The discussion of natural kinds, particularities, and reference (183 ff), would be helped by being informed by a cross typological perspective. Tangentially, one could warn that conflating scientific taxonomies with semantic categories (e.g., whether *tomatoes* are 'fruit' or 'vegetable') which arises in the discussion of Kripke's views on the matter (185 ff) is a hazardous business, which would require that we cognize meaning as a consequence of exposure to scientific literature. Formal logic and truth values take us in the direction of claiming that gold "means" Atomic Number 79 (ibid.), with those implications for its molecular structure. But this is not the realm of reference in natural language.

The author comes down in the right territory in his analysis of the historical naming of Neptune following its discovery in 1781. He demonstrates that, as so often happens with theoretical matters, the facts interfere in the matter of "the ineliminable sociality of naming and

names" (218). Likewise he is correct to refute the notion that "one might refer even though all of the descriptions that the entire language community associates with a name fail to pick out the intended reference" (221); as he puts it so well, "we cannot all be wrong" and still successfully refer (ibid.). These conclusions are consistent to the core with the themes of Pragmatism. Finally, he is right to conclude, "reference, even semantic reference, is not a dyadic relation between word and object, but a triadic relation between word and object and interpretant" (228). Thus, the "sociality of naming," a process which requires interpretation, looks not to the past for authority but to the future for subsequent successful reference.

In this text the author sketches positions of Searle and Kripke, Peirce, James, and Dewey, Putnam, Elgin and Rorty, Eco, Apel, and Habermas, and synthesizes their thought in a recursive exposition of reference and the operations of naming in a manner that is lucid, cogent, and apt. This text is remarkable in its scope, assimilating as it does an astonishingly wide corpus, valuable reading for anyone who thinks about language.

References

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