

THE FAILURE OF PRAGMATIC DESCRIPTIVISM

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There are two major semantic theories of proper names: Semantic Descriptivism and Direct Reference. According to Semantic Descriptivism, the semantic content of a proper name N for a speaker S is identical to the semantic content of a definite description “the F” that the speaker associates with the name. According to Direct Reference, the semantic content of a proper name is identical to its referent. As is well known, Semantic Descriptivism suffers from a number of drawbacks first pointed out by Donnellan (1970) and Kripke (1972).¹ The first difficulty is semantic: in many cases, the definite description that S associates with N (if it denotes) denotes an entity other than the referent of N. The second difficulty is epistemic: in many cases, contrary to what Semantic Descriptivism predicts, an utterance of “N=the F” does not semantically express a proposition that is knowable *a priori*. And the third difficulty is modal: although Semantic Descriptivism entails that the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of “N=the F” is *metaphysically necessary*, in many cases the relevant proposition is actually *metaphysically contingent*.

Direct Reference faces three main difficulties of its own. First, there is the problem of cognitive significance (or, as it has come to be known, Frege’s Puzzle): if the content of a proper name is its referent, then different proper names have the same content, and hence utterances of “N=M” and “N=N” semantically express the same proposition; yet these two utterances differ in cognitive significance, and it would seem

that utterances semantically expressing the same proposition should not differ in cognitive significance. Second, there is the problem of substitution: if the content of a proper name is its referent, then co-referential proper names should be intersubstitutable in propositional attitude contexts *salva veritate*; yet linguistic intuitions suggest that substitution of co-referential proper names in such contexts often fails to preserve truth-value. In recent years, Direct Reference theorists have made some headway in replying to these objections.² But they have struggled to find an appropriate response to the third difficulty: the problem of empty names.

An empty name is a name that has no referent. Examples of such names abound. One prominent example is the case of Leverrier, who in 1859 thought he had discovered a planet responsible for the perturbations in the orbit of Mercury, a planet he named “Vulcan”. As astronomers later realized, there is no such planet, and hence the name “Vulcan” does not refer. As Braun (1993; 2005) points out, the existence of empty names poses a number of challenges to Direct Reference. The two most basic challenges derive from the fact that Direct Reference entails that empty names have no semantic content. First, it would seem that expressions that have no semantic content are meaningless, and hence that Direct Reference entails the counterintuitive result that empty names, as well as all sentences containing them, are meaningless. Second, since meaningless sentences have no truth-value, it would seem that Direct Reference is committed to the counterintuitive claim that an utterance of a sentence such as “Vulcan does not exist” is neither true nor false. (The utterance seems clearly true.)

Direct Reference theorists have proposed various strategies for dealing with the problem of empty names. In this paper, I want to focus on one particular strategy that has

been championed by Ryckman (1988), Adams and Stecker (1994), Adams, Fuller, and Stecker (1993; 1997), and Taylor (2000).³ This strategy results from combining three theses.

The first thesis is that an utterance of a sentence containing an empty name N semantically expresses an “unfilled” or “gappy” proposition, that is, a proposition that has an empty place (or “gap”) where the referent of N would go if N had a referent. The thought here is that propositions are complex entities that are structurally isomorphic to the sentences used to semantically express them, and whose constituents are the worldly referents of the relevant sentential components. On this view, whereas an utterance of “Mercury is small” semantically expresses the proposition

<Mercury, being small>,

an utterance of “Vulcan is small” semantically expresses the proposition

< , being small>.

The second thesis, already familiar from the work of Grice (xxxx), is that sentences may be used to pragmatically convey propositions they do not semantically express. For example, an ordinary utterance of “Fred went to bed and took off his trousers” does not semantically express, but rather pragmatically imparts or conveys, the proposition that Fred took off his trousers *after* he went to bed.

And the third thesis, which builds on the second, is that the proposition pragmatically conveyed by a speaker S’s utterance of a sentence containing an empty name N (where “the F” is the—let us suppose, unique—definite description S associates with N) is identical to the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of the sentence obtained by replacing N with “the F”. On this view, when Leverrier uttered

“Vulcan is small”, he semantically expressed a gappy proposition but pragmatically conveyed the proposition expressed by an utterance of “The planet responsible for the perturbations in the orbit of Mercury is small”.

These three theses, taken together, define a position one might call “Pragmatic Descriptivism”. The basic idea is to blend Direct Reference with the insights of Pragmatics and Descriptivism. By adopting a Directly Referential semantics, but a Descriptivist pragmatics, of proper names, the Pragmatic Descriptivist’s hope is to avoid the disadvantages of Semantic Descriptivism and classical Direct Reference theory. In particular, Pragmatic Descriptivists claim that they can handle the problem of meaninglessness and the problem of truth-value posed by the existence of empty names. With respect to the charge of meaninglessness, Pragmatic Descriptivists insist that, although empty names have no semantic content, it doesn’t follow that sentences containing such names are meaningless. For utterances of such sentences semantically express gappy propositions, which, though in some sense incomplete, are legitimate semantic structures. In this way, a sentence such as “Vulcan is small” contrasts with a sentence such as “Framus glibs” insofar as an utterance of the former semantically expresses a proposition (of a kind) while an utterance of the latter does not. Moreover, with respect to the problem of truth-value, the Pragmatic Descriptivist can insist that, although an utterance of “Vulcan does not exist” is literally neither true nor false, our *taking it to be true* may be explained as the result of our having confused the gappy proposition it semantically expresses with the clearly true descriptive proposition (to the effect that there is no planet responsible for the perturbations in the orbit of Mercury) it pragmatically conveys.

Despite its obvious theoretical virtues, Pragmatic Descriptivism has recently come under fire. Everett (2003), in particular, has advanced four different lines of criticism, to which Adams and Dietrich (2004) have responded in some detail. In the rest of this paper, I argue that Adams and Dietrich's replies to Everett's criticisms are ineffective. If I am right, we can understand not only *that*, but also exactly *how*, Pragmatic Descriptivism goes wrong.

The paper divides into two parts. In section 1, I canvas Everett's criticisms of Pragmatic Descriptivism. In section 2, I consider and then criticize Adams and Dietrich's reply to Everett. In a brief conclusion, I summarize the relevant results and sketch a different and, I would argue, more promising way of handling the problem of empty names.

1. Everett's Criticisms of Pragmatic Descriptivism

Everett (2003) mounts four objections to Pragmatic Descriptivism: (A) the Modal Profiles Problem, (B) the Filled Names Problem, (C) the Different Descriptions Problem, and (D) the No Descriptions Problem. Let's look at each of these criticisms in turn.

A. The Modal Profiles Problem

Suppose that a speaker S associates with name N a unique definite description, "the F". According to Pragmatic Descriptivism, when S utters "N is identical to M" (where N is an empty name and M is a filled name) S's utterance semantically expresses a gappy proposition but pragmatically conveys the proposition that M is the F. But, in many cases, S's utterance is necessarily false, while the proposition that M is the F is possibly

true. For example, our intuitions tell us both that an utterance of “Santa is identical with John Perry” is necessarily false and that it is possibly true that John Perry is the jolly plump person who brings presents to everyone at Christmas (Everett 2003, 16).

As Everett argues, the Pragmatic Descriptivist will have difficulty accounting for our modal intuitions in this sort of case. On the one hand, we do not come by our intuition that the utterance says something that is necessarily false by keying on the proposition allegedly semantically expressed, for this proposition is gappy and hence, according to the Pragmatic Descriptivist, truth-valueless. And, on the other hand, we do not come by the same intuition by confusing the proposition allegedly pragmatically conveyed with the proposition allegedly semantically expressed, for the proposition allegedly pragmatically conveyed is possibly true. Yet these two options appear to exhaust the reasonable explanatory strategies (Everett 2003, 16-21).

B. The Filled Names Problem

According to Pragmatic Descriptivism, utterances of sentences containing *empty* names pragmatically convey descriptive propositions. Given that it is unreasonable to suppose that the operation of pragmatic mechanisms depends on whether names are empty or filled (or on whether speaker or audience takes names to be empty or filled), the Pragmatic Descriptivist must accept that utterances of sentences containing *filled* names pragmatically convey descriptive propositions too. However, Pragmatic Descriptivists also explain our intuitions about the truth-value of utterances of sentences containing empty names by supposing that we tend to confuse the propositions pragmatically conveyed by these utterances with the propositions they semantically express. By parity

of reasoning, then, this supposition should also apply to utterances of sentences containing filled names. There too the Pragmatic Descriptivist must suppose that our intuitions about truth-value are driven by our tendency to confuse information semantically expressed with information pragmatic imparted. But there's the rub. As Donnellan's and Kripke's semantic, epistemic, and modal arguments show, our intuitions about the truth-value of utterances of sentences containing filled names are not parasitic on our intuitions about the truth-value of the descriptive propositions allegedly pragmatically imparted by these utterances. For example, although we recognize that it is necessarily the case that the teacher of Plato is a teacher, we have no temptation to suppose that it is necessarily the case that Aristotle is a teacher. All in all, this sort of consideration casts doubt on the Pragmatic Descriptivist's hypothesis that we have a tendency to confuse the propositions pragmatically conveyed by utterances of sentences containing empty names with the gappy propositions these utterances allegedly semantically express (Everett 2003, 21-25).

C. The Different Descriptions Problem

It often happens that different speakers associate different definite descriptions with the same filled name. You might think of Venus as the morning star and I might think of it as the evening star. Still, as it seems, if you and I both utter "Venus does not exist", we are both saying the same thing. As Everett points out, the same can happen in the case of empty names. He imagines the following example (Everett 2003, 25):

Suppose...that ten years ago you read *Faust Part I* while I read *Faust Part II*. Since then we have forgotten most of what we read, even the author, and...we mistakenly misremember various things happening in the fiction which did not really happen in it. Intuitively, however, I suggest that there is a sense in which the utterances you and I currently make of “Faust does not exist” and the utterances you and I made ten years ago, all say the same thing.

The problem, as Everett sees it, is that “we take the propositional content of utterances containing empty names to be stable across speakers and times in a way that the descriptions we associate with those names are not.” Everett concludes that “contra the [Pragmatic Descriptivist], our intuitions concerning what utterances of “Faust does not exist” say are not to be explained by holding that we confuse what such utterances pragmatically convey with their literal semantic content” (Everett 2003, 26).

D. The No Descriptions Problem

It can happen that a speaker associates no uniquely identifying description with a name, and this can happen as easily in the case of empty names as it can in the case of filled names. Under such circumstances, it is impossible for an utterance of a sentence containing the relevant name to pragmatically impart any descriptive proposition. And yet, contrary to what Pragmatic Descriptivism predicts, we still have the intuition that these utterances express something that has truth-value. Here is Everett’s own example (Everett 2003, 28):

Peter is making up a story about someone called “Henri”. Stacie and I hear him use the name “Henri” but we do not listen to what he is saying and we associate no descriptive conditions with the name. A long time passes, Stacie and I remember hearing the name “Henri” but we do not remember where we heard it. I say to Stacie: “Henri doesn’t exist.” I have spoken truly.

2. Adams and Dietrich’s Replies to Everett’s Criticisms and Why They Fail

In a recent paper, Adams and Dietrich (2004) respond to all four of Everett’s criticisms. I will now present their criticisms, explaining exactly how and why they fail.

A. Adams and Dietrich on the Modal Profiles Problem

The Modal Profiles problem stems from the fact that our intuitions tell us that an utterance U of a sentence such as “Santa Claus is identical to John Perry” is necessarily false. Adams and Dietrich agree that Pragmatic Descriptivists can account for these intuitions neither by supposing that speakers derive the modal profile of U from the modal profile of the proposition semantically expressed by U nor by supposing that speakers derive the modal profile of U from the modal profile of the proposition pragmatically conveyed by U. Rather, as they argue, speakers derive the modal profile of an utterance such as U from its *logical form*. As they put it (Adams and Dietrich 2004, 137):

“a=a” is a sentence schema for expressing necessary truths. There must be a filled name on both sides of the identity sign and the names on either side must name the same individual. So, our modal intuitions are that any sentence of this form, if it expresses a truth at all, will express a necessary truth...[W]e know that ‘Santa’ and ‘Perry’ do not name the same individual. So we know that if [U] expresses a falsehood, it will express a necessary falsehood. The intuition of necessity comes from the logical form of the expression.

The problem with this sort of reply is that it proves too much. Although some necessary truths (such as truths expressed by utterances of sentences of the form “a=a”) are necessary by virtue of logical form, other necessary truths are not necessary by virtue of logical form. Consider, for example, an utterance U2 of the sentence “John Perry is human”. If true, U2 semantically expresses a (metaphysically) necessary truth, for it is impossible for John Perry to be anything other than human (say, a frog or a turnip). But the logical form of the relevant sentence is “X is F”, which is hardly a “sentence schema for expressing necessary truths.” After all, an utterance of “John Perry is a philosopher”, which is of the form “X is F”, semantically expresses a possible falsehood. So in the case of many sentences containing filled names, our intuitions about the modal profile of utterances of those sentences are not driven by logical form. Rather, our intuitions are driven by the properties we attribute to the propositions we take those utterances to semantically express. We take “John Perry is human” to be necessarily true (if true) because we cannot conceive of a possible world in which the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of this sentence turns out to be false.

Now I have been talking of sentences containing filled names. But there is no reason to suppose that matters are any different in the case of sentences containing empty names. If our modal intuitions with respect to utterances of sentences containing *filled* names are driven by the features we attribute to the propositions semantically expressed by those utterances, then it stands to reason that our modal intuitions with respect to utterances of sentences containing *empty* names are driven by the very same features.

To see this, consider the following scenario.⁴ You and I are at the pet store and we overhear a customer talking to another about “James”. We don’t grasp any of the information about James that the one customer is trying to pass on to the other. As a result, the only description we associate with “James” is, let us suppose, “The individual called ‘James’ we heard about at the pet store.” (For further ramifications of this sort of scenario, see the section on the No Descriptions problem below.) Now imagine that the name “James” is empty, and that I produce an utterance U3 of the sentence “James is human.” It’s plain that, if U3 semantically expressed a truth, the relevant truth would be (metaphysically) necessary. (After all, everything that is human is necessarily human.) But Pragmatic Descriptivism has no way to account for this. For, first, the logical form of U3 (namely, “X is F”) does not require that U3 be interpreted as necessarily true if true. Second, according to Pragmatic Descriptivism, the proposition pragmatically conveyed by U3 (namely, that the individual called “James” we heard about at the pet store is human) is (metaphysically) contingent. And third, the only other proposition in the vicinity countenanced by Pragmatic Descriptivism is the “gappy”, and hence truth-valueless, proposition, $\langle \quad , \text{being human} \rangle$, allegedly semantically expressed by U3.

Thus, in the search for a plausible explanation of the modal profile of an utterance such as U3, the Pragmatic Descriptivist is left clutching at straws.

I conclude that the Modal Profiles problem remains unaddressed. With respect to utterances of sentences such as “John Perry is human” or “James is human”, the “logical form” gambit, clever as it is, simply doesn’t work. It is far more plausible to suppose that our modal intuitions are driven by the semantic features of sentential utterances, and this supposition is flatly inconsistent with the Pragmatic Descriptivist thesis that utterances of sentences containing empty names semantically express truth-valueless propositions.

B. Adams and Dietrich on the Filled Names Problem

The Filled Names problem stems from the widely accepted view that, with respect to utterances of sentences containing *filled* names, we have no tendency to confuse the propositions pragmatically conveyed with the propositions semantically expressed. But it is precisely this widely accepted view that Adams and Dietrich reject. As they see it, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that this kind of confusion happens on a regular basis.

To begin, Adams and Dietrich consider a hypothetical situation in which Laura utters the following sentence:

- (5) George Washington had wooden teeth.

As they argue (Adams and Dietrich 2004, 134):

Someone [let's say Stan] might easily take Laura to have said that the first president of the U.S. had wooden teeth. Surely if someone overhearing Laura's uttering (5) were asked "what did Laura say?" it would not be unexpected or inappropriate for [Stan] to answer "Laura said that the first U.S. president had wooden teeth".

Adams and Dietrich clearly read the situation as follows. When Laura uttered (5), she semantically expressed the singular proposition

<George Washington, having wooden teeth>,

but pragmatically imparted the descriptive proposition to the effect that the first U.S. president had wooden teeth. Stan's "not unexpected" and "not inappropriate" report to the effect that Laura said that the first U.S. president had wooden teeth reveals that he takes Laura to have semantically expressed the proposition she actually pragmatically imparted.

But this is meager evidence indeed. Surely there are other, at least as plausible, ways of accounting for the fact that Stan's report is neither unexpected nor inappropriate. To see this, it helps to notice that, under normal circumstances, Stan's report is appropriate by virtue of the fact that Laura believes that George Washington was the first U.S. president. But suppose that Laura erroneously believes that George Washington was the second U.S. president, that the second U.S. president had wooden teeth, and that the first U.S. president did not have wooden teeth. In such a case, it would be flatly

inappropriate for Stan to report that Laura said that the first U.S. president had wooden teeth. For this is something Laura would vehemently deny.

In order to explain the fact that Stan's report is *appropriate*, we need not assume that Stan's report is strictly *accurate*. Instead, we might simply assume that the report, though strictly inaccurate, is not so terribly inaccurate that it becomes worth challenging. Because there is a true statement in the immediate vicinity, it can happen that a strict falsehood simply isn't worth the bother. If we're careful, we should say that Stan is wrong to characterize Laura's statement the way he does: she did not really *say* that the first president of the U.S. had wooden teeth. But since Laura believed that George Washington had wooden teeth and at the same time held that George Washington was the first U.S. president (and so would have assented to the statement that the first U.S. president had wooden teeth), it is not completely misleading to represent her as having asserted (and hence as being committed to the claim) that the first U.S. president had wooden teeth.

Situations of this sort are so common we hardly notice them. Suppose Pierre assertively utters the sentence "Londres est jolie". It is not inappropriate, even if it strictly inaccurate, to report Pierre as having said that London is pretty (as long as Pierre takes "Londres" and "London" to co-refer). In the realm of attitude reports, serviceability does not entail truth.⁵ It follows that it is tendentious for Adams and Dietrich to claim that the appropriateness of Stan's report supports the hypothesis that Stan takes Laura to have semantically expressed the proposition she has actually pragmatically conveyed. For the *appropriateness* of Stan's report is fully compatible with its *inaccuracy*.

Similar remarks apply to Adams and Dietrich's second example. As they describe the relevant scenario (Adams and Dietrich 2004, 134):

Suppose Madonna has acquired the accolade of "the most controversial woman of rock". Everyone comes to associate that description with her. Madonna enters a noisy L.A. bar and Laura is overheard by some to say "Hey look, the most controversial woman of rock is here". Someone else has a hard time hearing and asks "What did she say?" It is so noisy in the bar that the answer he gets back [let's say, from Ollie] is "Madonna is here". To which he replies "Oh, the most controversial woman of rock is here". This seems...to be perfectly ordinary in every way and to be just what our [Pragmatic Descriptivist] theory predicts might happen.

Again, the facts of the situation are readily explained by supposing, not that Ollie *accurately* reported what Laura said, but rather that he provided a *serviceable* (i.e., not terribly misleading) paraphrase of Laura's actual statement. When Ollie reports Laura as having said that Madonna is here, his report is not worth challenging. "It's close enough to the truth," one might say, "and that's good enough for me."

The moral of this story is that Adams and Dietrich haven't provided sufficient reason to believe that, with respect to utterances of sentences containing filled names, speakers have a tendency to confuse the propositions pragmatically conveyed with the propositions semantically expressed. Thus the Filled Names problem remains unaddressed and continues to pose a significant challenge to Pragmatic Descriptivism.

C. Adams and Dietrich on the Different Descriptions Problem

According to Adams and Dietrich, the Different Descriptions problem consists in the charge that Pragmatic Descriptivism “will not handle the seeming stability of content of utterances containing empty names across times and speakers.” For if Everett “is likely to associate radically different descriptions with the name ‘Faust’ now than he did ten years ago,” then it would seem that Pragmatic Descriptivists would “have to say that an utterance [U4] of ‘Faust doesn’t exist’ by Everett ten years ago says something different than an utterance [U5] by Everett now” (Adams and Dietrich 2004, 129).

To this charge Adams and Dietrich quite sensibly reply that, according to Pragmatic Descriptivism, U4 and U5 semantically express the same gappy proposition, and hence the semantic content of “Faust doesn’t exist” is stable across time. (*Mutatis mutandis* for the stability of semantic content across speakers.) As they see it, what changes with time is the information pragmatically imparted, not the information semantically expressed. Adams and Dietrich therefore conclude that the Different Descriptions problem misses the mark (Adams and Dietrich 2004, 130):

Everett’s cross-temporal utterances may pragmatically impart different information on different occasions without raising a problem for [Pragmatic Descriptivism]. This is perfectly consistent with [Pragmatic Descriptivism], as long as the semantic content of the utterances does not change, as we maintain it does not.

Now the reason why Adams and Dietrich's response to the Different Descriptions problem fails is not that it is an inadequate rejoinder to the problem *as they understand it*, but rather that *they have misunderstood the problem to begin with*. Although some of what Everett says suggests that the heart of his criticism depends on the claim that the propositional content of U4 is identical to the propositional content of U5, the actual heart of his criticism depends on a different claim, namely that *we take* the propositional content of U4 *to be* identical to the propositional content of U5. The Different Descriptions problem is not that Pragmatic Descriptivism entails that the propositional content of U4 differs from the propositional content of U5; the problem is that Pragmatic Descriptivism *can't account for our intuition* that U4 and U5 semantically express the same thing. For at the heart of Pragmatic Descriptivism is the thesis that we confuse what an utterance pragmatically imparts with what the utterance semantically expresses. So if, as Adams and Dietrich readily admit, U4 and U5 pragmatically impart different propositions, then Pragmatic Descriptivism predicts that *we will take* U4 and U5 to semantically express *different things*. The problem is that this prediction is not borne out. Under these circumstances, pointing out, as Adams and Dietrich do, that Pragmatic Descriptivism does not entail that U4 and U5 semantically express different propositions, is simply beside the point.

Adams and Dietrich's mistake here stems from their having confused the fact *that U4 and U5 semantically express the same thing* with the fact *that speakers take U4 and U5 to semantically express the same thing*. Everett's criticism is that Pragmatic Descriptivism can't account for the latter, not that Pragmatic Descriptivism can't account

for the former. Nothing Adams and Dietrich say in reply to this objection provides an answer to Everett's criticism. I conclude that the Different Descriptions problem remains a serious threat to Pragmatic Descriptivism.

D. Adams and Dietrich on the No Descriptions Problem

The No Descriptions problem stems from the (putative) existence of possible cases in which a speaker acquires and uses a name without associating *any* definite description with it. These sorts of cases pose a threat because Pragmatic Descriptivism is committed to the view that an utterance of *any* sentence containing an empty name pragmatically conveys a descriptive proposition (where the descriptive element derives from a definite description associated by the speaker with the name).

Adams and Dietrich respond, not unreasonably, that "no descriptions" cases are really impossible. As they see it, "when one acquires a name, to the best of one's abilities, one keeps a file of particulars: where, when, from whom one heard the name" (Adams and Dietrich 2004, 131-132). Even when a speaker forgets from whom she heard the name, she remembers that she heard it from someone. So, in the "Henri" case, if we suppose that Stacie and I pick up the name "Henri" and then forget the circumstances under which we acquired it, we will still associate "Henri" with the description "the person named 'Henri' I heard about from someone." In this sort of scenario, then, there are descriptive propositions available to be pragmatically imparted by me and Stacie. So, upon reflection, the "Henri" case by itself poses no challenge to Pragmatic Descriptivism.

But to this sort of response Everett has a ready rejoinder, as Adams and Dietrich themselves acknowledge. Everett points out that, as Adams and Dietrich describe the “Henri” case, Stacie and I pragmatically convey *different* descriptive propositions if we both utter “Henri doesn’t exist.” The proposition *I* pragmatically convey is that there is no one named ‘Henri’ that *I* heard about from someone, while the proposition *Stacie* pragmatically conveys is that there is no one named ‘Henri’ that *she* heard about from someone. However, as Everett writes (Everett 2003, 29):

This will not do...If Stacie and I simultaneously uttered [“Henri doesn’t exist”] we would have said the same thing.

To this rejoinder, Adams and Dietrich admit that the different propositions pragmatically imparted by me and Stacie “could not explain the sameness of our sayings.” But, as they argue (in a way reminiscent of their reply to the Different Descriptions problem—Adams and Dietrich 2004, 132):

It is not the sameness of our sayings that needs explaining. That sameness is accounted for by the sameness of the incomplete propositions that [Stacie] and I express by our utterances. What is to be accounted for here is the sameness of appearance of having uttered truths. And this is accounted for even if [Stacie] pragmatically imparts a truth involving her (not me) and I pragmatically impart a truth involving me (not her).

Now it must be acknowledged that, as a response to the *letter* of Everett's rejoinder, Adams and Dietrich's reply is successful. Everett seems to assume that the Pragmatic Descriptivist thesis that Stacie and I pragmatically convey different propositions when we utter "Henri doesn't exist" is incompatible with the widely held intuition that Stacie and I say the same thing. But, as Adams and Dietrich rightly point out (and as we've already seen), there is no incompatibility here, for one of the pillars of Pragmatic Descriptivism is the thesis that different speakers who utter the same sentence containing an empty name semantically express the same gappy proposition (and hence, in a perfectly ordinary sense, do indeed say the same thing).

But to say that Adams and Dietrich have articulated a successful reply to the *letter* of Everett's rejoinder is not to say that their reply successfully handles the *spirit* of the rejoinder. For what Everett surely *means* is that the hypothesis that Stacie and I pragmatically convey different propositions in uttering "Henri doesn't exist", when combined with the main assumptions of Pragmatic Descriptivism, is incompatible with the fact that *our intuitions tell us that* Stacie and I are saying the same thing. For, as we've seen, Pragmatic Descriptivists hold that we tend to confuse the propositions that are pragmatically imparted by utterances of sentences containing empty names with what those utterances semantically express. If, as Adams and Dietrich insist, Stacie and I pragmatically convey different propositions when we utter "Henri doesn't exist," then Pragmatic Descriptivism predicts that *our intuitions should tell us that* Stacie and I are saying (i.e., semantically expressing) *different* things in uttering those words. And yet our intuitions in fact tell us the exact opposite.

So Pragmatic Descriptivists face the following dilemma. Either they acknowledge the existence of cases in which a speaker associates no uniquely identifying description with an empty name in her linguistic repertoire (in which case they must acknowledge that the speaker does not pragmatically convey a descriptive proposition when she utters a sentence containing that empty name), or they insist that speakers always associate at least some minimally descriptive information with every empty name (in which case they can't account for the widely held intuition that, for any sentence S containing an empty name, different speakers who utter S semantically express the same thing). Either way, the No Descriptions problem remains a serious objection to Pragmatic Descriptivism.

3. Conclusion: A Third Way

As I've argued, the Modal Profiles problem, the Filled Names problem, the Different Descriptions problem, and the No Descriptions problem, *when properly understood*, represent insurmountable objections to Pragmatic Descriptivism. Given that other attempts to rescue Direct Reference theory from the problem of empty names are less than compelling,⁶ semantic theorists would do well to consider alternative Non-Descriptivist, Non-Directly-Referential solutions.

One proposal is that the semantic content of an utterance of a proper name N is identical to N itself.⁷ This view, which I'll call the Reflexive Theory, has a number of attractive features. On the one hand, it has none of the disadvantages of Semantic Descriptivism. For on the semantic side, it doesn't matter whether the description a

speaker associates with N successfully picks out N's referent. On the Reflexive Theory, the content of an utterance of N is N; and since the referent of N is whatever gets picked out by the content of N, it turns out that the referent of N is whatever gets picked out by N (which is exactly as it should be). On the modal and epistemic sides, the Reflexive Theory simply does not entail that the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of "N=the F" should be either metaphysically necessary or knowable *a priori* to a speaker who associates "the F" with N.

Moreover, the Reflexive Theory avoids the classic thorns in the side of Direct Reference theory. For, like Semantic Descriptivism, the Reflexive Theory predicts that the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of "N=N" (namely, $\langle N, \text{identity}, N \rangle$) is self-evident while the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of "N=M" (namely, $\langle N, \text{identity}, M \rangle$) is not, and hence that the two sentences will differ in cognitive significance. Further, like Semantic Descriptivism, the Reflexive Theory does not entail that co-referential names are intersubstitutable in propositional attitude contexts *salva veritate*. And finally, the Reflexive Theory provides a simple solution to the various difficulties spawned by the problem of empty names. For, first, the Reflexive Theory takes empty names to be meaningful rather than meaningless, given that utterances of empty names, just like utterances of filled names, have semantic content. And, second, the Reflexive Theory predicts that the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of a sentence containing an empty name is complete, rather than gappy, and thus capable of being either true or false (rather than truth-valueless).

The Reflexive Theory also explains something that Semantic Descriptivism and Direct Reference theory cannot explain, which is the fact that we do not take ourselves to

understand the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of a sentence containing a name unless we are familiar with the name itself. As an illustration, consider the three sentences S1, S2, and S3:

S1: The cat is on the rug.

S2: Le chat est sur le tapis.

S3: Fifi is on the rug.

Our intuitions tell us that the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of S1 (in English) is identical to the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of S2 (in French). So one need not be familiar with the French words “chat” and “tapis” in order to understand the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of S2. *By contrast*, it is not possible for a speaker to understand the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of S3 unless the speaker is already familiar with the name “Fifi”. It is partly for this reason that proper names are special, in fact, unique lexical items. The simplest and most obvious way to account for this phenomenon is to suppose that “Fifi” itself is a constituent of the proposition expressed by an utterance of S3, which is exactly what the Reflexive Theory predicts. With respect to explaining this phenomenon, Semantic Descriptivism and Direct Reference theory are left holding the bag.

I conclude that the arguments of this paper establish two results. The first is that, properly understood, Everett’s criticisms of the Pragmatic Descriptivist gambit in defense of Direct Reference theory are ultimately successful. The second is that there is an attractive alternative to Semantic Descriptivism and Direct Reference theory (namely, the

Reflexive Theory) that avoids the problems that beset each, including, most notably, the problem of empty names.

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¹ For a useful summary of the classic arguments against Semantic Descriptivism, see Soames (2002, 18-24).

² On Frege’s Puzzle, see Salmon (1986) and Braun (2002). On the problem of substitution, see Salmon (1986; 1989; 1990), Soames (1987a; 1987b), Crimmins and Perry (1989), Richard (1990), Crimmins (1992), and Braun (1998).

³ Soames (2002) defends a related strategy. For independent criticisms of Soames’ version of this strategy, see Braun and Sider (forthcoming) and Caplan (forthcoming). For other strategies, see Braun (1993; 2005), Salmon (1998), and Everett (2001).

⁴ I owe this example to Dana Nelkin.

⁵ [reference omitted]

⁶ See, for example, Everett's (2003) criticisms of Braun (1993) and Salmon (1998).

⁷ [reference omitted]