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Descriptivism, scope, and apparently empty names

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Abstract Some descriptivists reply to the modal argument by appealing to scope ambiguities. In this paper, we argue that those replies don't work in the case of apparently empty names like 'Sherlock Holmes'.

Keywords Names · Empty names · Descriptions · Descriptivism · Modal argument · Widescopism · Scope

1 Introduction

Some descriptivists reply to Saul Kripke's (1972) modal argument by appealing to scope ambiguities. In this paper, we argue that those replies don't work in the case of apparently empty names like 'Sherlock Holmes'. We begin, in the next section, by presenting descriptivism, the modal argument, and two descriptivist replies that appeal to scope ambiguities.

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2 'Joss Whedon'

According to *descriptivism*, every name is synonymous with some definite description.[1] Suppose that, according to descriptivism, 'Joss Whedon' is synonymous with 'the creator of *Buffy*'. In that case, according to descriptivism,

(1) It is necessary that, if Joss Whedon exists, then Joss Whedon created *Buffy*.

is synonymous with

(1D) It is necessary that, if the creator of *Buffy* exists, then the creator of *Buffy* created *Buffy*.

('D' is for 'definite description'.) Kripke's *modal argument* against descriptivism is that (1) and (1D) aren't synonymous, since they differ in truth-value: (1) is false, whereas (1D) is true.

In reply to the modal argument, some descriptivists adopt *widescopism*, according to which the definite description that a name is synonymous with must take wide scope with respect to modal operators like 'it is necessary that'.[2] According to widescopism, (1D) is ambiguous, but (1) isn't: (1) is synonymous with (1D) only on the reading of (1D) on which (1D) is equivalent to

(1D-W) [the x: Bx] $\Box$ (x exists $\rightarrow$ Bx)

where 'B' is 'created *Buffy*' (or 'is a creator of *Buffy*'). ('W' is for 'wide scope'.) And (1D-W) is false, since the creator of *Buffy*—namely, Joss Whedon—is such that there is a possible world in which he exists but, alas, did not create *Buffy*. So (1) and (1D-W) agree in truth-value, as desired.

In reply to the modal argument, descriptivists can also adopt *neutralism*, according to which the definite description that a name is synonymous with can take either wide scope or narrow scope with respect to modal operators.[3] According to neutralism, (1D) is ambiguous, and so is (1). According to neutralism, there is a reading of (1) on which it is true—namely, a reading on which it is equivalent to (1D-W)—but there is also a reading of (1) on which it is false: namely, a reading on which it is equivalent to

(1D-N) $\Box$ ([the x: Bx] x exists $\rightarrow$ [the x: Bx] Bx).

('N' is for 'narrow scope'.) But, neutralists can say, this result isn't incorrect: (1) is ambiguous in this way; it's just that this ambiguity is hidden or silent.

3 'Joss Whedon' meets 'Sherlock Holmes'

Suppose that, according to descriptivism, 'Sherlock Holmes' is synonymous with 'the famous detective who lives at 221B Baker Street'. In that case, according to widescopism,

[1] See, for example, Stanley 1997, Sosa 2001, and Nelson 2002.

[2] See, for example, Dummett 1981a, b; Sosa 2001; and Hunter 2004.

[3] In conversation, Philip Bricker has endorsed neutralism. In "On Denoting," Russell (1905) endorses a view in the vicinity of neutralism.

(2) It is necessary that it is not the case that Joss Whedon is Sherlock Holmes.

is unambiguously false, since it is synonymous with

(2D-WW) [the x: Bx] [the y: Dy] $\Box \neg x = y$

where '*D*' is 'is a famous detective who lives at 221B Baker Street'.[4] ('WW' is for 'wide scope-wide scope'.) And (2D-WW) is false, since there is no famous detective who lives at 221B Baker Street.

We think that, since there is at least one reading of (2) on which it is true, the result that (2) is unambiguously false is incorrect. Here, we're not relying on the strong claim that there is *no reading* of (2) on which it's *false*. (As it happens, we're inclined to accept the strong claim, and informal polling suggests that most, but not all, speakers agree with us.) Rather, we're relying on the weak claim that there is *at least one reading* of (2) on which it's *true*. And the weak claim, we think, is more plausible than the strong claim. (Intuitions that would lead one to accept at least the weak claim are attested in the literature, and informal polling suggests that there is a consensus among speakers that the weak claim is true.[5])

But, even if one does not start with the intuition that there is at least one reading of (2) on which it is true, there's a line of thought that might reasonably lead one to conclude that there is such a reading of (2).[6] This line of thought starts with the observation that, if one asks oneself the question 'Could I have been Sherlock Holmes?', one is likely to answer 'No'. Speakers who think that

(3) I couldn't have been Sherlock Holmes.

is true and who think that Joss Whedon is not modally different from them in this respect should accept that there is at least one reading of (2) on which it is true.[7] So

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[4] (2) is modeled on an example of Everett's (2003, p. 16). (See note 5.) Everett uses 'John Perry' and 'Santa' instead of 'Joss Whedon' and 'Sherlock Holmes'. This change is relatively unimportant. What is more important is that Everett's example doesn't contain modal or other operators, so he doesn't discuss scope. (He discusses scope elsewhere, in Everett 2005. But he doesn't discuss apparently empty names there.) That the apparently empty name is embedded under an operator like negation (or 'According to the fiction', or 'Sam believes that') is what allows many direct reference theorists to accept the truth of (2). See note 9.

[5] For example, Everett (2003, p. 16) says that

(*i*) Joss Whedon is Sherlock Holmes.

expresses a necessary falsehood and that "There is no possible circumstance in which [Joss Whedon] is [Sherlock Holmes]." (We have changed the example; see note 4.) Everett uses the example against a view held by Adams and others. In reply, Adams and Dietrich (2004, p. 136) don't reject Everett's claim about the modal profile of (*i*); rather, they accept "the modal intuition that [(*i*)] expresses a necessary falsehood" and attempt to explain that intuition away. Everett and Adams and Dietrich thus accept that (*i*) expresses a necessary falsehood. And, if (*i*) expresses a necessary falsehood, then (2) is true.

[6] Thanks to an anonymous referee and to Synners for pressing us here.

[7] Another line of thought starts with the intuition that there is at least one reading of

(*i*) It is necessary that it is not the case that Joss Whedon is Arthur Conan Doyle.

on which it is true. (Speakers who don't start with the intuition that there is at least one reading of (2) on which it is true might have the intuition that there is at least one reading of (*i*) on which it is true.) The reasoning behind the intuition that there is at least one reading of (*i*) on which it is true might go like this: "If (*i*) is false, then there is a possible world in which Joss Whedon is Arthur Conan Doyle. But there is no such possible world, since, in any possible world in which Joss Whedon and Arthur Conan Doyle both exist, they will differ in their modal properties: for example, in any possible world in which Joss Whedon we think that there is at least one reading of (2) on which it is true; and, as a result, we think that it is bad for widescopism if it entails that (2) is unambiguously false.

Descriptivists can't avoid this argument by rejecting widescopism in favor of neutralism. For there is *no* reading of

(2D) It is necessary that it is not the case that the creator of *Buffy* is the famous detective who lives at 221B Baker Street.

on which it is true. And hence even neutralism yields the incorrect result that (2) is false on all readings. (2D) contains two operators: the modal operator 'it is necessary that' and the negation operator 'it is not the case that'. So there are three scope possibilities for each definite description: wide scope (with respect to both operators), intermediate scope (narrow scope with respect to 'it is necessary that' but wide scope with respect to 'it is not the case that'), or narrow scope (with respect to both operators). And, when the definite descriptions both take wide scope (or intermediate scope, or narrow scope), there are two possibilities, depending on which definite description takes scope over the other.[8] So there are twelve readings of (2D).

We have already seen that (2D) is false on one of the two readings on which both definite descriptions take wide scope with respect to 'it is necessary that'. Let's consider the other eleven readings. First, (2D) is false on the other reading on which both definite descriptions takes wide scope.

(2D-WW*) [the y: Dy] [the x: Bx] $\Box \neg x = y$

(2D-WW*) is false, since there is no famous detective who lives at 221B Baker Street.

Second, (2D) is false on the six readings in which neither definite description takes wide scope.

(2D-II) $\Box$ [the x: Bx] [the y: Dy] $\neg x = y$
(2D-II*) $\Box$ [the y: Dy] [the x: Bx] $\neg x = y$
(2D-IN) $\Box$ [the x: Bx] $\neg$ [the y: Dy] $x = y$
(2D-NI) $\Box$ [the y: Dy] $\neg$ [the x: Bx] $x = y$
(2D-NN) $\Box \neg$ [the x: Bx] [the y: Dy] $x = y$
(2D-NN*) $\Box \neg$ [the x: Bx] [the y: Dy] $x = y$

('II' is for 'intermediate scope-intermediate scope', 'IN' is for 'intermediate scope-narrow scope', 'NI' is for 'narrow scope-intermediate scope', and 'NN' is for 'narrow scope-narrow scope'.) (2D-II), (2D-II*), (2D-IN), (2D-NI), (2D-NN), and

Footnote 7 continued
and Arthur Conan Doyle both exist, Joss Whedon will have the property *being identical with Joss Whedon in the actual world*, which Arthur Conan Doyle will lack." Similar reasoning might lead one to conclude that there is at least one reading of (2) on which it is true: "If (2) is false, then there is a possible world in which Joss Whedon is Sherlock Holmes. But there is no such possible world, since, in any possible world in which Joss Whedon and Sherlock Holmes both exist, they will differ in their modal properties: for example, in any possible world in which Joss Whedon and Sherlock Holmes both exist, Joss Whedon will have the property *existing in the actual world*, which Sherlock Holmes will lack.".

[8] Thanks to an anonymous referee here.

(2D-NN*) are false, since there is a possible world in which someone is both the creator of *Buffy* and the famous detective who lives at 221B Baker Street.

Third, (2D) is false on both readings on which 'the creator of *Buffy*' is the only definite description that takes wide scope.

(2D-WI) [the x: Bx] $\Box$ [the y: Dy] $\neg\ x = y$
(2D-WN) [the x: Bx] $\Box\ \neg$ [the y: Dy] $x = y$

('WI' is for 'wide scope-intermediate scope', and 'WN' is for 'wide scope-narrow scope'.) (2D-WI) and (2D-WN) are false, since the creator of *Buffy*—namely, Joss Whedon—is such that there is a possible world in which he is the famous detective who lives at 221B Baker Street.

And, finally, (2D) is false on the two readings on which 'the famous detective who lives at 221B Baker Street' is the only definite description that takes wide scope.

(2D-IW) [the y: Dy] $\Box$ [the x: Bx] $\neg\ x = y$
(2D-NW) [the y: Dy] $\Box\ \neg$ [the x: Bx] $x = y$

(2D-IW) and (2D-NW) are false, since there is no famous detective who lives at 221B Baker Street.[9]

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[9] Brock (2004, pp. 16–17) argues that widescopism yields the incorrect result that
(*i*) It is possible that Sherlock Holmes is a famous detective who lives at 221B Baker Street.
is false. (Brock uses a 'Santa Claus' example. But replacing his example with ours doesn't affect the cogency of his argument.) But Brock's argument has two limitations. The first limitation is that it cannot be endorsed by many direct reference theorists, since many direct reference theorists reject (*i*). (See Brock 2004, pp. 13–15.) The second limitation is that descriptivists can avoid Brock's argument by rejecting widescopism in favor of neutralism (provided that they can explain why, in some cases, the wide-scope reading is hidden or silent, whereas, in other cases, it is the narrow-scope reading that is hidden or silent).

The argument that we present in the text does not have either of these limitations. First, the argument can be endorsed by many direct reference theorists, since many direct reference theorists can accept (2). (Direct reference theorists who accept both (*a*) that 'Sherlock Holmes' is genuinely empty and (*b*) that sentences that contain genuinely empty names fail to express propositions will reject (2). But direct reference theorists need not accept both (*a*) and (*b*), and those who reject at least one of them can accept (2). On rejecting (*a*), see, for example, Salmon 1998, Soames 2002, and Braun 2005. On rejecting (*b*), see, for example, Kaplan 1989; Braun 1993, 2005; and Salmon 1998.) And, second, descriptivists cannot avoid the argument by rejecting widescopism in favor of neutralism.

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