

# Evans: “The Causal Theory of Names”

## BACKGROUND

### Speaker’s Denotation vs. Name Denotation

Evans distinguishes between these, and suggests that both Kripke and the description theorists he criticizes have failed to draw this distinction.

#### Speaker’s Denotation

“What a name denotes upon a particular occasion of its use” (p. 296).

#### Name Denotation

“What conditions have to be satisfied by an expression [x] and an item [y] for [x] to be a name of [y]” (p. 296).

### Two Kinds of Description Theories

There will thus be a description theory of **speaker’s** denotation, and one of **name** denotation:

#### Description theory of speaker’s denotation

A name (on a particular occasion of its use by a speaker *S*) denotes whatever unique item satisfies most or all of the descriptions *S* would associate with that name.

#### Description theory of name denotation

A name (as used by a group of speakers) is associated with a description or set of descriptions (obtained from the beliefs of those speakers). The bearer of the name is the object that satisfies these descriptions.

### Kripke’s Attack on the Description Theory

According to Evans, Kripke attacks the theory of speaker’s denotation, not the theory of name denotation. Evans himself thinks that Kripke’s criticism is effective against the first theory, but does not touch the second.

## EVANS VS. THE DESCRIPTION THEORY

The **weaker version** of the descriptive theory of speaker's denotation: "some descriptive identification is necessary for a speaker to denote something" (p. 297, right).

Evans thinks that even the weaker version is false. He sees it as a fusion of two thoughts, what we might call the **intention** requirement and its underlying **philosophy of mind** requirement:

### 1. Intention requirement

"In order to be saying something by uttering an expression one must utter the sentence with certain intentions — i.e., one must be aiming at something with one's use of the name." (p. 297)

### 2. Philosophy of mind requirement

"To have an intention or belief concerning some item one must be in possession of a description uniquely true of it." (p. 297)

Evans does not seem to have any objection to (1), the intention requirement. His objections are directed against (2), the Philosophy of Mind, which he says (p. 298) "is held by anyone who holds that  $S$  believes that  $a$  is  $F$  if and only if:

$$\exists\phi[(S \text{ believes } \exists x (\phi x \ \& \ (\forall y)(\phi y \rightarrow x = y) \ \& \ Fx)) \ \& \ \phi a \ \& \ (\forall y)(\phi y \rightarrow y = a)]"$$

What does this formula say? Roughly: "there is a property that  $S$  believes to be uniquely instantiated by some  $F$ , and that is, in fact, uniquely instantiated by  $a$ ." In other words,  $S$  has a certain description in mind that he takes to single out a certain  $F$  thing, and  $a$  alone fits that description.

### The condition is not sufficient

That's because it leaves out any **connection** between the believer ( $S$ ) and the object of belief ( $a$ ) other than the *fit* between  $a$  and a description ( $\phi$ ) the believer has in mind. There is nothing else to actually connect **that very object**,  $a$ , to  $S$ .

The general form of a counter example to this condition looks like this: Think of some property,  $\phi$ , that  $S$  believes to be uniquely instantiated by some  $F$ , and let  $a$  be an object that (unknown to  $S$ ) uniquely instantiates  $\phi$ .

E.g., suppose that Tom believes that the property of being the oldest living European at midnight on July 1, 1999 is uniquely instantiated. [Who wouldn't hold such a belief? There has to be **some** European who is older than all the others at that time.] Further, suppose that Tom believes that the person who uniquely instantiates this property is Norwegian (perhaps he thinks that Norwegians are, on the whole, very long-lived). Finally, suppose that the oldest European at that time is an Italian named Giuseppe. Then the proposed account of belief holds, absurdly, that *Tom believes that Giuseppe is Norwegian*. But, clearly, Tom holds no beliefs about Giuseppe.

What's wrong with the proposed account is its **omission of any causal relation** between the believer and the object of belief. In order for it to be true that *S* believes that *a* is *F* (where '*a*' is a name), there has to be some causal relation involving *a* (or the name '*a*') and *S* (or *S*'s use of the name '*a*').

Our counter example shows that the proposed condition for '*S* believes that *a* is *F*' is not a **sufficient** condition. But that may be irrelevant, for the formula Evans gives on p. 298 seems to have over-stated the Philosophy of Mind requirement as he stated it on p. 297. There, it demands only a **necessary** condition.

### **The condition is not necessary**

We need a different kind of counter example—a case in which *S* believes that *a* is *F*, but *S* cannot provide a property that is uniquely instantiated by *a* and that *S* believes to be uniquely instantiated by some *F*.

A counter example is suggested by Evans' case on p 298 (top right): "What makes it one rather than the other of a pair of identical twins that you are in love with?" So let *S* be the man in this example, and *a* and *b* are the twins. *S* believes that *a* is the love of his life, but there is no  $\phi$  that is uniquely instantiated by *a* and that is believed by *S* to be uniquely instantiated by the love of his life. (Presumably, any features by means of which *S* would try to pick out *a* would also be shared by *b*.)

So what makes it possible for *S* to believe that *a* is *F* in the absence of a uniquely identifying description? Once again, a **causal relation** may take up the slack. We may suppose that *S* has never met—and may not even know about—*b*. But he has met *a*, perceived *a*, etc. That's what makes it *a*, rather than *b*, that he's in love with.

## **EVANS VS. THE CAUSAL THEORY**

Evans thus agrees with Kripke that there must be a causal component to a correct account of naming. But he thinks that "the causal theory unamended is not adequate" (301).

## Dubbing and change of reference

A problem with making the **dubbing event** an essential part of the causal chain: it does not take into account the fact that a name can change its reference, and become the name of something other than the object originally dubbed.

- An actual example of this: ‘Madagascar’. Originally, it named a portion of the African mainland. But, misunderstood by Marco Polo, it became attached instead to the great island off the coast of Africa (p. 301).
- Imaginary case: the switched babies (p. 301).

Evans wants to “sketch a theory which will enable ‘Madagascar’ to be the name of the island yet which will not have the consequence that ‘Gödel’ would become a name of Schmidt in the situation envisaged by Kripke ....” (p. 301)

## What are the relata in the causal relation?

Let us begin with the case of Louis (p. 298-9). In a pub, *S* hears a conversation about a certain Louis, and joins in the conversation. His use of the name ‘Louis’ thus acquires (according to the causal theory) whatever denotation it had when it was used by the other participants in the conversation. And their denotation, in turn, is traced back through a causal chain to an initial “dubbing” of the bearer of the name himself, say, King Louis XIII of France. So on Kripke’s picture, *S*’s use of ‘Louis’ denotes King Louis XIII.

But Evans thinks this is the wrong result. For suppose that *S* has completely forgotten the conversation. Indeed, *S* may become thoroughly confused, and say something like, “I think Louis was a basketball player.” Still, for Kripke, *S* is talking about Louis XIII if the causal history of his acquisition of the name traces back to the dubbing of Louis XIII.

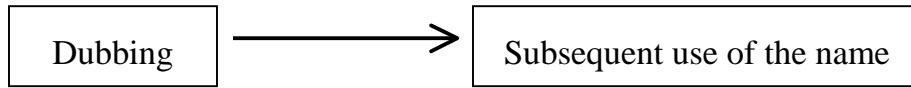
Evans’s objection is that this gives initial dubbings “magical powers”:

... for [Kripke] an expression becomes a name just so long as someone has dubbed something with it and thereby caused it to be in common usage. This seems little short of magical.

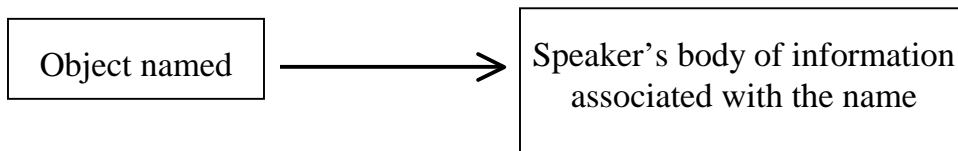
Instead, Evans proposes that the relevant causal connection is not between the **dubbing** of Louis and *S*’s subsequent use of the name, but between **Louis himself** and the **body of information** that *S* associates with (a particular use of) the name ‘Louis’. According to Evans (p. 301, right), Kripke

“has mislocated the causal relation; the important causal relation lies between that item’s states and doings and the speaker’s body of information—not between the item’s being dubbed with a name and the speaker’s contemporary use of it.”

### **Kripke’s picture**



### **Evans’s picture**



The arrows here represent **causality**, not **fit**.

So on Evans’ s theory, the reason that ‘Madagascar’ names the island is **not** that contemporary speakers’ beliefs about what they call ‘Madagascar’ **fit** the island better than the mainland, but because the island itself plays a **dominant causal role** in their acquisition of those beliefs.

## **EVANS’S POSITIVE THEORY**

Evans’s aim is modest (p. 302): an account of what makes an expression a name, but an account that will allow for change of denotation. Further, Evans will make use of an unanalyzed notion of “speaker’s reference.”

His theory combines elements of both the description theory and the causal theory.

### **From the description theory:**

The denotation of a name is fixed by the bodies of information (something like the “clusters” of the description theorist).

### **From the causal theory:**

The fixing of the denotation of a name is by causal origin, not by fit. The question is not “which object satisfies most of the descriptions we associate with the name?”, but “which object is the **dominant source** of the descriptions we associate with the name?”

The theory itself is stated (in a fairly complicated way) on p. 304, left. It amounts roughly to this:

“NN” is a name of  $x$  if (and only if):

1. There is a community in which people use “NN” to refer to  $x$ ;
2. It is common knowledge that “NN” is so used;
3. The reference in (1) relies on the knowledge in (2), and not on the knowledge that  $x$  satisfies some predicate embedded in “NN.”

So worded, the account of naming seems to preserve little of either the description theory or the causal theory. But that is only partially correct. For although (3) explicitly disavows the description theorist’s “fit”, the causal theory gets incorporated in (1). The unanalyzed notion of ‘using “NN” to refer to  $x$ ’ implicitly relies on a causal notion—people use “NN” to refer to  $x$  **only if  $x$  is the dominant source** of information they associate with “NN”.

Evans summarizes his theory with the “Turnip” case (p. 306): A youth,  $A$ , (who has the nickname “Turnip”) leaves a town while still a youth. Fifty years later, a man  $B$  comes to the town and lives as a hermit. Falsely believing that  $A$  has returned, the surviving elders start calling  $B$  “Turnip”. (Evans claims that  $B$  is not Turnip, and that the elders are mistaken in thinking this.) The younger residents pick up the name from the elders, and begin to use “Turnip” to refer to  $B$ . Eventually, the elders die off, and the only remaining users of the name continue to use it to refer to  $B$ .

At this point, which (if either) of the two is “Turnip” a name of? Evans’s theory can accommodate either answer—it depends on other, as yet unstated, facts.

1. If no further information about  $A$  gets passed on from the elders to the younger townspeople, then  $B$  will become the dominant source of the information they associate with the name “Turnip”, which will then “transfer” and become a name of  $B$ .
2. If there is a sufficiently rich body of information about  $A$  that the elders have passed on to the others, then  $A$  may well remain “the dominant source of their information” (p. 306). In this case, their use of “Turnip” will still denote  $A$ , and if they are apprised of all the relevant information, “they too would acknowledge ‘that man over the hill isn’t Turnip after all’.”

## Dubbings reconsidered

Evans rejects the **dubbing** in favor of **the object dubbed** as the thing playing the initial causal role in a causal theory. (We must trace our use of the name back to the **object**, not to the **dubbing** of it.) But this leaves a residual problem: how can we use a causal theory to explain the naming of **abstract objects** (numbers, sets, etc.)?

For example, the numeral '17' is a name of the number 17. But how can there be a causal relation between a number and subsequent uses of a numeral? In short, how can abstract objects stand in causal relations? It would seem that it is always something **concrete** that is a cause.

In this kind of case, it makes more sense to trace the causal chain back to the dubbing, rather than to the object. For although 17 is an abstract object, the act of **dubbing** it (first performed by some mathematician, no doubt) was a concrete event that can stand in causal relations to subsequent events.

## SUMMARY

1. Evans's theory is more causal than anti-causal. For a name "NN" to be a name of an object,  $x$ , there must be a causal connection (not just a descriptive fit) between "NN" and  $x$ .
2. But the causal connection is not between an original **dubbing** of  $x$  with the name "NN" and a contemporary user's **use** of "NN"; rather, the causal connection is between  $x$  *itself* and the body of descriptions that the contemporary user associates with "NN".
3. Evans's theory, although causal, is not anti-intentional. That is, Evans does not propose to replace the notion of a name's denoting an object (or a person's referring to an object with a name) with some purely causal relation between the user and the referent devoid of intentional content. There is no effort, e.g., to say that the relation of *S having x is mind* can be explicated as a purely causal (non-intentional) relation between  $S$  and  $x$ .
4. Evans's proposal makes use of many notions that are left vague or unspecified. E.g., *intending to refer*, *community of language users*, *dominant source*, etc. So, as with Kripke, we get more of a **picture**, rather than a theory, of naming.