

## In Defense of the Proper Name Theory of Quotation

The Proper Name Theory of Quotation (PNT) gets a lot of bad press. According to Paul Saka, it is “an utter failure.”<sup>1</sup> In the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Herman Cappelen and Ernest Lepore claim that, “It no longer is defended by anyone.” They present “some of the reasons why the unanimous consensus is that [the PNT] fails miserably.”<sup>2</sup> In this paper I challenge that consensus. I claim that the arguments against the PNT are far weaker than are generally supposed. By supplementing the PNT with a metasemantic account of how quotation-expressions are introduced into a language, we can transform the PNT into a compelling account of the semantics of direct quotation.

The PNT is a theory of how quotations are related to their denotations. According to the PNT quotations are semantically simple: the denotations of quotations do not have any meaningful constituents that need to be combined. A single denotation is assigned to any whole quotation. Furthermore, according to the PNT a semantic theory assigns a meaning to a quotation-expression directly from the lexicon. Interpreting a quotation does not require any appeal to character or context of utterance. The quotation is essentially a proper name for the denoted expression. For the purposes of this talk I will be restricting myself to cases of *unmixed* quotation, where the quotation's syntactic role in a sentence is that of a nominal. Though I find mixed quotations fascinating I suspect that the syntactic differences between mixed and unmixed quotation will legislate for very different treatments of the two.

I begin by canvassing three initial motivations for the PNT, as well as the four major objections that have been taken to undermine it. Those four objections all point to crucial facts about quotation that appear inexplicable on the PNT. The first objection is the objection from infinitude. There are an infinite number of linguistic expressions that can be quoted. According to the PNT quotations are atomic expressions. Together these claims require that our language contain an infinite number of atomic expressions, but this would make competence with such a language impossible.

The second objection is an objection from novel uses. Normally it is thought that we cannot fully comprehend a sentence involving a novel proper name, unless we have previously been taught that particular name. But there is no analogous problem with sentences incorporating novel quotations.

(1) Samantha looked up at her computer screen and saw the string  
'aslfjdjalksjfahsgqheghghggg'. She must have fallen asleep on her keyboard

The objection from novel uses asks how we could possibly understand such sentences if quotations are semantically simple.

According to the third objection, the disquotational schema, (' $\Phi$ ' is true iff  $\Phi$ ), is generally taken to be a truism. But if quotation expressions are just unstructured proper names, we have no explanation for why this could be.

According to the fourth objection, quotations, especially when iterated, bear a special relationship with the items that are being quoted. “'Fruit-bat' “ and 'fruit-bat' are connected in a very special way. In some sense, “'fruit-bat' “ seems to contain 'fruit bat'. But the connections between proper names and their denotata are supposed to be arbitrary. How could we explain this systematic relation between the putative name and its denotation?

I argue that these objections can easily be met by the PNT if it is supplemented with a *metasemantic* account of how quotations are formed. Semantics is the study of how linguistic

1 Saka, P. (1998). 'Quotation and the use-mention Distinction', *Mind*, 107: 113–35.

2 Cappelen, H. and E. Lepore (2012) 'Quotation,' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/quotation/>

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expressions are associated with meanings. Semantics includes studying how simple linguistic expressions are assigned simple meanings, as well as how those meanings can combine to form complex meanings. Metasemantics is the study of how linguistic expressions *come to be associated* with their meanings. On the one hand, a semantic theory will tell us what semantic value is associated with the name 'Fluffy.' The semantic theory will contain a clause such as:

(2) 'Fluffy' denotes Fluffy.

A metasemantic theory, on the other hand, will explain how that particular cat ended up being associated with the name 'Fluffy.' A metasemantic theory might model the reasoning behind Fluffy's original baptism as well as the mechanisms whereby the name 'Fluffy' became fixed and was transmitted to other language users. A thought experiment can illustrate how expressions can be formed via metasemantic conventions.

Imagine a culture, the Orderists, who have a strict policy of naming children by the order in which they were born in a given year. The first child to be born in a year is named '1', the second '2' and so on. These can be genuine names: the fact that Orderists will only socially sanction names that satisfy this convention does not entail that semantically the names are less than directly referential. We can use standard tests to argue that Orderist names are genuine proper names.

Knowing that a name is an Orderist name, together with knowing the Orderist naming convention, allows one to reasonably infer information about the name's denotation. The information about birth-order is conveyed by our knowledge of the metasemantic convention and not by the structure of the semantic content of the expression.

I defend the PNT by supplementing it with the claim that quotation-expressions are generated by a similar metasemantic convention—a convention that allows us to create names for linguistic expressions and related symbols. According to what I call the 'quotation convention,' when we want to introduce a name to denote a linguistic expression we can do so provided that the phonological form of the new quotation-expression is identical to the phonological form of the original expression and that the orthographic form of the quotation-expression is generated by concatenating quote marks to the beginning and end of the denoted expression.

(QC) For any symbol  $\Phi$ , we can always add to the lexicon a new expression that denotes  $\Phi$ , is spelled by concatenating quotation marks before and after the spelling of  $\Phi$  and is pronounced identically to  $\Phi$ .

This simple and intuitive supplement allows the PNT to avoid the entire battery of objections. Just as we can understand how the Orderist naming convention could generate an infinite number of proper names in a natural language, the QC could be used to introduce any of an infinite number of quotations into the lexicon. Furthermore, just as with Orderist names, quotations can convey complex information in virtue of having been formed by the QC even in the absence of any semantic structure. Knowing the quotation was formed under the QC suffices for knowing what the quotation denotes, even for a speaker who has never before encountered that particular quotation. Given several reasonable general principles about language, we can derive the disquotational schema from the QC. Finally, the special connection between quotations and their denotations can be explained as well by the QC. As all of the standard objections to the PNT fail to hold water, the PNT deserves to take its rightful place as a leading approach to the semantics of direct quotation.