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Semantic intuitions: Reply to Lam

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1. Introduction

How do proper names refer? Roughly, causal-historical theories hold that proper names refer to the individuals to which they are historically linked, while descriptivist theories hold that names refer to the individuals that satisfy the descriptions competent speakers associate with them. Machery, Mallon, Nichols, and Stich (2004) reported that some philosophically important intuitions about the reference of proper names in hypothetical situations (viz. in Kripke's (1972/1980) Gödel case) vary both within and across cultures. While Americans tend to have causal-historical intuitions—intuitions in line with what causal-historical theories of reference say proper names refer to—Chinese tend to have descriptivist intuitions—intuitions in line with what descriptivist theories of reference say proper names refer to. In addition, they provided evidence that a sizeable minority of Americans have descriptivist intuitions and a sizeable minority of Chinese causal-historical intuitions.

In a thought-provoking article, Lam (2010) proposes a deflationary explanation of the cross-cultural variation found by Machery et al. (2004). Lam's explanation proceeds in two steps. First, noting that the Chinese participants in Machery et al. were presented with vignettes in English, he hypothesizes that their descriptivist answers might be due to some difference between their linguistic competence with their first language and their linguistic competence in English. He presents new evidence that Cantonese speakers tend to have causal-historical intuitions when they are presented with vignettes in Chinese just as speakers of English do when they are presented with vignettes in English, and he concludes (2010, 320) that "[t]his new data concerning the intuitions of Cantonese speakers raises questions about whether cross-cultural variation in answers to questions on certain vignettes reveal genuine differences in intuitions, or whether differences in answers stem from non-intuitional differences, such as differences in linguistic competence." Second, Lam proposes that, perhaps because of the peculiarities of their linguistic competence in English, Chinese participants in Machery et al. (2004) might have given descriptivist answers because they mistake the causally-historically referring proper names used in the Gödel vignette for another

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class of names that do refer descriptively (the Julius-type names). As he puts it (2010, 325), “[i]f there were some way in which a group of speakers mistakenly interpreted genuine ‘Gödel’-type cases to be ‘Julius’-type cases, then there would be an appearance of descriptivist intuitions where in fact there are none. Perhaps in Machery et al.’s original study, the non-native but still fluent speakers of English for some reason or other (a) exhibited an incomplete grasp of how English names were working in the story or (b) interpreted English probes of the ‘Gödel’-type as probes of the ‘Julius’-type.”

In this article, we critically discuss Lam’s two hypotheses. In Section 1, we present some new evidence that the cross-cultural findings reported in Machery et al. (2004) are not due to the fact that participants in Hong-Kong were presented with vignettes in English. In Section 2, we propose two distinct explanations of the differences between Lam’s and Machery et al.’s findings. In Section 3, we examine Lam’s second hypothesis: The Chinese participants in Machery et al. (2004) erroneously identified names like “Gödel” with another type of names, Julius-type names. Finally, in Section 4, we briefly discuss the philosophical significance of the cross-cultural findings reported in previous work.

2. The role of language in Machery et al.’s and Lam’s studies

2.1. Machery et al.’s study with a vignette in Chinese

Our first task is to explore whether Chinese tend to give descriptivist answers when presented with the vignettes used by Machery et al. (2004) because of the peculiarities of their linguistic competence in English. We presented 71 undergraduates from the University of Hong-Kong with a Chinese translation of the Gödel vignette used in Machery et al. (2004; see Appendix A for original and translation).^{1,2}

61% of the participants picked the descriptivist answer. While the proportion of descriptivist answers is somewhat smaller than in Machery and colleagues’ study (where 71% of Chinese participants reported descriptivist intuitions), the important point is that the Chinese participants again tended to have descriptivist intuitions about the reference of proper names in the kind of hypothetical situations exemplified by the Gödel case (see also Deutsch, Carroll, Sytsma, & Machery, Ms).

¹ When people distinguish between Mandarin and Cantonese, they are usually talking about two different *spoken* languages. Given some sentence written in standard Chinese, both a Mandarin speaker and a Cantonese speaker will be able to read and understand it, although their pronunciation will be different when they will read it aloud. That is why *written* translations are usually called “Chinese translations.” As Barry Lam noted (personal communication), there is also an unregulated written system of Cantonese, which contains Cantonese syntax and vocabulary largely incomprehensible to readers of written Chinese who do not speak Cantonese. Lam’s vignettes were written in this system, while our vignettes were in standard written Chinese.

² We did make one minor change. Machery et al.’s (2004) vignette ended up with a question (“When John uses the name ‘Gödel,’ is he talking about...”), while the translation ends up with an assertion (When John uses the name ‘Gödel,’ he is talking about...”).

To determine whether this proportion of descriptivist answers among Chinese participants remains statistically different from the proportion of descriptivist answers among Americans, we compared Chinese participants’ answers to the Chinese translation of the Gödel vignette with Americans’ answers to the Gödel vignette in English. Participants consisted of 82 English-speaking Americans (age range: 18–71; age mean: 33.7; 24.4% males) who took part in this study on-line through the Philosophical Personality website (philosophicalpersonality.com). 62.2% of American participants gave a causal-historical answer, and Chinese participants were significantly more likely to give a descriptivist answer ($\chi^2(1, N = 153) = 7.9, p = .005$).

2.2. Lam’s study 1 in English

To provide further evidence that the difference between Lam’s and Machery et al.’s results is not due to the language in which the vignettes are written, participants in Hong-Kong were presented with Lam’s Shakespeare vignette in English.

In a classroom setting, 22 participants at the University of Hong-Kong were presented with Lam’s vignette as it is formulated in English in Lam’s article (age range: 22–46; 81% males). All participants were native speakers of Cantonese or Mandarin and were of Asian ethnicity. In addition to a participant who reported having taken a similar survey before, two participants were excluded because their responses to the demographic survey left it unclear whether their main cultural background was Chinese: One was born in Canada, and the other one might not have spent most of her life in Mainland China and Hong-Kong. Out of the 19 remaining participants, 18 answered that, when the people described in the vignette use “Shakespeare,” their use of this name is about Shakespeare (94.7%), consistent with Lam’s findings. As a further check, we did our own translation of Lam’s Cantonese version of the vignette back into English and presented this to an additional group of participants (see Appendix A for the translation). In a classroom setting, 10 participants at the University of Hong-Kong were presented with this translation (age range: 22–40; 80% males). Our results were similar: All participants answered that, when the people described in the vignette use “Shakespeare,” their use of this name is about Shakespeare.

2.3. Discussion

Our findings speak against Lam’s first hypothesis: It is not the case that Chinese participants give descriptivist answers because they are presented with vignettes in English. Chinese participants’ answers to the English version of the Gödel vignette are similar to their answers to the Chinese translation of this vignette; further, Chinese participants’ answers to the English version of Lam’s Shakespeare vignette are similar to their answers to Lam’s Chinese translation of the vignette. So the difference in language does not explain the difference in response. Why, then, did Chinese participants in Lam’s and in our studies pick the causal-historical answer when presented with the Shakespeare vignette, while they picked the descriptivist

ist answer when presented with the Gödel vignette? We examine this question in the next section.

3. Explaining the discrepancy

Lam's Shakespeare vignette is only loosely inspired by Machery et al.'s (2004) vignettes. We speculate that the differences between Lam's and Machery et al.'s vignettes explain why the former elicited causal-historical answers from native speakers of Cantonese. Furthermore, we argue that Lam's vignettes are not entirely appropriate for testing whether people have descriptivist or causal-historical intuitions about the reference of proper names.

There are two relevant differences between Lam's vignette (the Shakespeare vignette) and the vignettes used by Machery and colleagues (the Gödel and the Tsu Ch'ung Chih vignettes). First, in the Gödel vignette, the character John is ignorant of the fact that the description he associates with the proper name "Gödel" is not true of the original bearer of this name (the man originally called "Gödel"). Such ignorance is said to be typical of John's linguistic community, and perhaps of all humans (the same is true of the Tsu Ch'ung Chih vignette). The vignette says explicitly that "most people who have heard the name 'Gödel' are like John: the claim that Gödel discovered the incompleteness theorem is the only thing they have ever heard about Gödel." By contrast, Lam's vignette refers to "a group of people who do not know anything of the English author Shakespeare except the name and that he is the author of 'Romeo and Juliet.'" This turn of phrase may pragmatically suggest that most individuals, perhaps most speakers in the linguistic community to which this group of people belongs, know more about Shakespeare than these individuals.

It will likely matter to people's referential intuitions whether it is *most competent speakers* or instead just a *group* of speakers who associate a description D with a proper name $\langle n \rangle$. While in the former case descriptivists would naturally use D as the relevant description to identify the reference of $\langle n \rangle$, it is unclear in the latter case whether descriptivists should be expected to do so. Stating that only a group of speakers instead of most competent speakers associate D with $\langle n \rangle$ might be taken to suggest that the linguistic competence of the speakers in this group is deficient since failing to follow the usual linguistic patterns of a linguistic community is often to speak improperly.³ For this reason, descriptivists might be reluctant to use D as the basis for identifying the reference of $\langle n \rangle$ since D is then not the description competent speakers tend to associate with $\langle n \rangle$.

Thus, in Lam's Shakespeare vignette, a descriptivist might reasonably assume that, in contrast to the group of speakers who only associate with "Shakespeare" the (by stipulation) false description "the author of *Romeo and Juliet*," most competent speakers associate with this name a more complex description, e.g., "the author of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Richard III*, *King Lear*, *A Mid-*

summer Night's Dream and the *Sonnets*." In addition, Lam's Shakespeare vignette pragmatically conveys that the individual originally called "Shakespeare" satisfies most components of this latter description: Since it is only specified that this individual did not write *Romeo and Juliet*, the reader can legitimately infer that he did write the other plays and the *Sonnets*, for, if this were not the case, the vignette would have also specified that the individual originally called "Shakespeare" did not write these (see Grice's (1975) maxim of quantity). As a result, Lam's vignette invites descriptivists to answer that in the hypothetical situation "Shakespeare" is used to refer to Shakespeare. If this is correct, then this vignette is not appropriate for determining whether intuitions about the reference of proper names vary.

As Lam (personal communication) notes, this reply assumes that Cantonese speakers hold (perhaps implicitly) that the referent of a name is this individual that satisfies most elements of the description competent speakers associate with this name. Lam also thinks that this version of descriptivism is undermined by arguments that do not involve intuitions. Briefly, we agree with the former claim, but we are skeptical of the latter claim.

Let's now turn to the second relevant difference between Lam's and Machery et al.'s vignettes. The question in Machery et al.'s vignette used definite descriptions "the person who really discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic" and "the person who got hold of the manuscript and claimed credit for the work," while the question in Lam's vignette re-used the proper names already used in the story, "Shakespeare" and "Spencer."

The use of proper names to formulate the question at the end of vignettes probing intuitions about reference may bias participants' answers and, in the case of Lam's vignettes, this may have led participants to answer "Shakespeare" even if they had descriptivist intuitions about the reference of proper names. Because the question uses the name "Shakespeare" to refer to one of the two characters described in the story—viz. the individual who published *Romeo and Juliet*—it assumes in effect that "Shakespeare" is the name of this individual, and it thus suggests that participants would be mistaken to answer that "Shakespeare" refers to Spencer rather than Shakespeare when it is used by the group of people described in the vignette. For this reason, Lam's question primes participants to answer that in the hypothetical situation "Shakespeare" is used to refer to Shakespeare. If this is correct, then we have a second reason to think that this vignette is not appropriate for determining whether intuitions about the reference of proper names vary.

Previous work on folk intuitions about the reference of proper names circumvented this possible problem since definite descriptions were used in the question to refer to the individuals described in the story (Deutsch et al., Ms; Machery, Olivola, & de Blanc, 2009; Machery et al., 2004; Sytsma & Livengood, in press). The use of descriptions instead of proper names in the question avoids implying that one of the two possible uses of the proper name ("Gödel," "Shakespeare," or "Tsu Ch'ung Chih") is the correct one.

In response, one could note (following Ludwig, 2007, 105) that Machery et al. used "Gödel" to refer to the man

³ Of course, this is not necessarily the case since some variation is recognized to be dialectal.

who stole the theorem of incompleteness of arithmetic in the body of their vignette, and one could then argue that if our hypothesis were correct this use of “Gödel” should have primed participants to answer that “Gödel” refers to the man who stole the theorem. However, the use of definite descriptions instead of proper names (“Gödel” and “Schmidt”) to formulate the question pragmatically conveys that it is an open question which of the two characters described in the story John’s use of “Gödel” refers to: If it were not an open question, the question would have used proper names (Grice’s maxim of quantity). Thus, in the vignettes used in previous research, the formulation of the question used to elicit intuitions about the reference of proper names cancels the implication carried by the use of “Gödel” to refer to the man who stole the theorem in the body of the vignettes.

Lam (personal communication) argues that the two lines of response sketched in this section make erroneous predictions about Cantonese speakers’ answers to his “Julius-type” vignettes (Lam, 2010, Section 3) on the following grounds: Most competent speakers in these vignettes do not associate with the relevant proper names (“Richard Rich” and “Shakespeare”) the same definite descriptions as the speakers in the village, and Cantonese speakers should thus not use the descriptions associated with proper names by the speakers in the village to determine the reference of these proper names. We disagree: In Lam’s first Julius-type vignette, for instance, “Richard Rich” as used by the villagers is merely homonymous with “Richard Rich” as used by other competent speakers, and it is a mere accident that the two names sound the same. As a consequence, only the description used by the villagers is relevant for a descriptivist participant.⁴

Naturally, it is an empirical question whether the explanations of the differences between Lam’s and previous findings proposed in this article are correct, and we plan to test them in future work.

4. Lam’s hypothesis about Julius-type names

In addition to the hypothesis that the Chinese participants in Machery et al. (2004) gave descriptivist answers because of peculiarities of their linguistic competence in English, Lam develops a new explanation of Machery et al.’s findings, which is worth considering independently of his first hypothesis. According to Lam, people give descriptivist answers in the Gödel and Tsu Ch’ung Chih vignettes because they confuse the proper names used in those vignettes with another kind of name, which, following Lam, we will call “Julius-type names.”

As Lam characterizes Julius-type names (following Soames, 2002), competent speakers know that Julius-type names are intended to be abbreviations for definite descriptions. For instance, “Jack the Ripper” may be a shorthand for the description “whoever turns out to be serial killer active in the districts in and around the Whitechapel district of London in 1888.” If Julius-type names

are really intended to be shorthands for descriptions, they refer descriptively.⁵ An individual was the reference of “Jack the Ripper” if and only if he was the serial killer active in the districts in and around the Whitechapel district of London in 1888. Thus, if most Chinese participants and a minority of American participants in Machery et al. (2004) treated “Gödel” as a Julius-type name, they should indeed have given descriptivist answers.

Although we find Lam’s explanation interesting, we do not think it undermines the claim that intuitions about the reference of proper names vary across cultures (or the claim that they vary within cultures). To treat names like “Gödel” in the Gödel vignette and “Tsu Ch’ung Chih” in the Tsu Ch’ung Chih vignette used in Machery et al. (2004) as Julius-type names just is to have descriptivist intuitions about these names. Thus, what Machery et al.’s results suggest can be put as follows: Chinese, but not Americans, tend to treat names as Julius-type names. The crucial cross-cultural difference remains. A similar point applies for the intra-cultural differences.

Perhaps it could be objected that it is a *confusion* to treat “Gödel” and “Tsu Ch’ung Chih” as Julius-type names, but this would beg the question: This objection would assume that these names refer causally-historically for a majority of Chinese participants, but this is precisely what is at stake. In addition, since the studies reported in Section 1 suggest that the difference between Lam’s and Machery et al.’s results is not due to the peculiarities of the Chinese participants’ linguistic competence in English, there is no evidence that these participants were more confused than the American participants.

Alternatively, one might maintain that Julius-type names are not really names at all: Although they look like names, they are definite descriptions in disguise. In this spirit, Lam writes that “such constructions are not genuine proper names” (2010, 323). As a consequence, intuitions about what these terms refer to in hypothetical situations are not relevant for theories of reference. However, we see no non-question-begging reason to hold that Julius-type names are not genuine names. They syntactically work as other names do, and they might be rigid designators, as other names seem to be (Kripke, 1972/1980, 79). Indeed, it is worth noting that, as illustrated by his discussion of “Jack the Ripper” in *Naming and Necessity*, Kripke viewed Julius-type names as genuine names—just ones that referred differently from the way he thought names typically refer.

To summarize our argument, we find Lam’s second hypothesis appealing: Most Chinese participants might well treat many names as Julius-type names. However, rather than undermining the conclusion drawn by Machery and colleagues, this hypothesis is in line with it.

5. Philosophical implications

Lam’s discussion of the philosophical implications of the empirical work on intuitions about the reference of proper names touches on several difficult questions that

⁴ We bracket the fact that curiously the Julius-type vignettes do not pit a causal-historical and a descriptivist intuition against one another.

⁵ Although it is not obvious that names like “Jack the Ripper” are mere abbreviations for descriptions, we will not push this point here.

are best addressed elsewhere. Still, we would like to discuss two points raised by Lam's article.

First, while Machery et al. (2004) focus on arguing that the cross-cultural variation between Americans and Chinese participants has important philosophical consequences, they also indicate that their findings of variation *within* both the American sample and the Chinese sample fuel similar arguments (for discussion, see Mallon, Machery, Nichols, & Stich, 2009; Sytsma & Livengood, in press). Although Lam acknowledges that intra-cultural and cross-cultural variations in intuitions about reference have similar philosophical implications, he only focuses on the latter. As such, Lam's critique is at best incomplete. Further, the results of his first study also suggest intra-cultural variation in intuitions about reference since he found that a sizable minority of American participants gave a descriptivist response in his Shakespeare vignette.

Second, in light of Lam's discussion, we propose that there are three main answers philosophers might make if it turns out that people in different cultures really tend to have different intuitions about the reference of proper names:

1. Assert that names refer in the same way in all languages and that intuitions are not reliable guides to their semantic properties.
2. Assert that names refer differently in different cultures and that intuitions are reliable guides to their semantic properties.
3. Assert that some languages do not have proper names at all.

We doubt that philosophers of language would welcome any of these options. As some of us have argued elsewhere (Mallon et al., 2009), it is unclear what kind of evidence can be used to decide between theories of reference if ordinary intuitions about reference turn out to be unreliable guides about the reference of proper names (for discussion, see Deutsch, 2009; 2010). Endorsing the second option would mean that philosophers of language need to examine the intuitions of ordinary competent speakers empirically, which would lead to a sea-change in their usual methodology (Machery & Stich, in press). Finally, following the third option would render the question of how proper names refer purely definitional: By definitional fiat, proper names would refer causally-historically.

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Appendix A. Appendix

A.1. Machery et al.'s original Gödel vignette

Suppose that John has learned in college that Gödel is the man who proved an important mathematical theorem, called the incompleteness of arithmetic. John is quite good at mathematics and he can give an accurate statement of

假設約翰在大學學習時得悉有一個叫做哥德爾的人發現了一個重要的數學定理稱之為“不完全性”定理。約翰長於數學，且他對該定理能做出準確之陳述。

他認為該定理的發現者是哥德爾。但是，他對哥德爾的了解僅止於此。

但假設哥德爾實際上不是該定理的作者，而它的真實作者是一個叫做施密特的人，這個叫做施密特的人的屍體幾年前在不明朗的情況下在維也納一個地方被找到。

而他的朋友哥德爾，因為種種原因得到了他的手稿，並聲稱自己才是該手稿之作者，而世人也以為哥德爾是該定理之發現者。因此，哥德爾被公認為發現了這個“不完全性”定理的發者。

大多數人聽到哥德爾這個名字的反應和約翰一樣，他們唯一所知的關於哥德爾的僅是他發現了“不完全性”數學定理。

當約翰使用哥德爾這個名字的時候，他說的是：

- (A) 得到手稿並聲稱自己是該手稿作者之人。
- (B) 真正發現“不完全性”定理之人。

the incompleteness theorem, which he attributes to Gödel as the discoverer. But this is the only thing that he has heard about Gödel. Now suppose that Gödel was not the author of this theorem. A man called “Schmidt”, whose body was found in Vienna under mysterious circumstances many years ago, actually did the work in question. His friend Gödel somehow got hold of the manuscript and claimed credit for the work, which was thereafter attributed to Gödel. Thus, he has been known as the man who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic. Most people who have heard the name “Gödel” are like John; the claim that Gödel discovered the incompleteness theorem is the only thing they have ever heard about Gödel. When John uses the name “Gödel”, is he talking about:

- (A) the person who really discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic? or
- (B) the person who got hold of the manuscript and claimed credit for the work?

A.2. Translation of Machery et al.’s original Gödel vignette from English to standard Chinese

A.3. Translation of Lam’s Shakespeare vignette from Chinese to English

Suppose there is a group of people who have no idea who the English author Shakespeare is, except that he is the author of “Romeo and Juliet”. They do not know that actually Shakespeare did not write the play “Romeo and Juliet”; a German man named “Spencer” wrote the play. But Spencer died before the play was published. Shakespeare found the play and published it as his own. Nobody in this group of people knows about this. They use the

name “Shakespeare” in conversation, for instance, they may ask each other, “I wonder whether Shakespeare was English or German?”

When these people use the name “Shakespeare” in a conversation, are they talking about A or B?

- (A) Shakespeare
- (B) Spencer

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