

Synthesis and Reaction Paper on Donnellan's "Speaking of Nothing"

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Received: 29 July 2023; **Accepted:** 25 August 2023; **Published:** 17 October 2023

Abstract:

This article first summarizes Donnellan's main points on the the problem of identity statements, the problem of nonexistent statements and the proposal of taking historical explanation theory as a new perspective to deal with the two puzzles. Then, this article provides a personal response to Donnellan's ways of argument and explains the feasibility of his new concepts and the historical explanation theory to clarify the puzzles.

Keywords:

The Problem of Identity Statements, Problem of Nonexistent Statements, Historical Explanation

1. Introduction

In his long article "Speaking of Nothing" (1975) [1], Keith S. Donnellan analyzes two puzzles, the problem of identity statements and the problem of nonexistent statements, and tries to adopt "the historical explanation theory" or "causal theory" to deal with them, particularly the second one.

Donnellan mainly divides his paper into nine parts, with an introduction and eight sections under eight subtitles. In the introduction, the two puzzles are explained. Donnellan first focuses on how a statement of the form "a is identical to b," can differ from a corresponding from "a is identical to a." from cognitive value. Then, based on some examples on the nonexistent and the use of singular terms in negative existence statements, he puts forward the question: how can one say something about what does not exist? Though Russell seems to provide a plausible solution by introducing the theory of definite descriptions and singular expressions, Donnellan asserts that such singular expressions are rarely found in everyday speech. So, Donnellan attempts to utilize historical explanation theory of reference to handle Russell's apparent reference to the nonexistent puzzle.

Firstly, Donnellan discusses three kinds of apparent reference to the nonexistent and three situations in which those kinds occur in section I. He starts distinguishing "discourse about fiction" from "discourse about actuality" and then points out difference between the use of "predicative" statement and that of "existence"

statement. In the category of “discourse about fiction”, fictional, mythological and legendary persons, places or things are under discussion. And therein arises another question: how can there be true propositions that apparently involve predicting properties of what does not exist? Then, Donnellan turns to the term “discourse about actuality”, which assumes that the speaker is talking about people, places or things that take place in the history of human world. He adopts the publication of *The Horn Papers* as the very example to continue his argument on how a singular expression with no referent could be spoke and understood. Finally, he interprets predicative statements (or existence statements) and negative existence statements by mentioning the difference between denying the existence of something altogether and denying its present existence or its existence at certain time in the past.

Next, Donnellan puts forward Russell’s motivation for introducing “genuine” names that has been ignored compared with other terms like ordinary singular terms, definite description and proper names in ordinary language in section II. The special properties of “genuine” names are supposed to dissolve puzzle about reference. “Jacob Horn does not exist” does not refer to some individual in order to say something about him, but merely to indicate that a particular class of things is either empty or contains more than one member, which has significance for the historical explanation view.

In the third section, Donnellan comes back to see the the negative side of the proper name theory. Just like “genuine” names, it is not always the case that a referent of a proper name can be determined by the currently associated descriptions. While in section IV, Donnellan shifts to the positive aspect of the theory of reference. In the case of “N is $\emptyset$ ”, where N is a name and $\emptyset$ a predicate, what the speaker has said is true if and only if N refers to some entity that has meets with the proper designated by $\emptyset$. However, what is the appropriate relation between an act of using a name and some object that the name was used to refer to? Donnellan introduces a historical explanation to examine the sentence “Socrates was snub-nosed” to see the question. Also, an omniscient observer of history may probably needed to pick out an individual as the referent of the name “Socrates” even though that individual are not correctly described by the speaker. The final test of the referent is a kind of connection, and the customary assumptions and use of indicators depend on fairly reliable guides to the existence of such a connection. But problem also arises when there is an absence of historical connection or when the historical explanation theory lacks specificity in connection.

Thereafter, Donnellan proposes a possible solution to the problem-when a proper name is used but there is a failure of reference, then no proposition has been expressed. In a predicative statement, existential statements always have definite description and therefore will have a corresponding object or thing as reference. But in the nonexistent case, the proper names may not obey the principle of identifying descriptions. Therefore, one seemly possible solution is to see the proper name as special case. “Santa Clause” in “Santa Clause will come tonight” is not a concealed definite description, but can be regarded as one in the special context of “Santa Clause does not exist” and “Santa Clause exists”. Unfortunately, this proposal is likely to be rejected in existence statements advocated by Russell, in which a name simply stands in place of some definite description.

Then, Donnellan introduces a concept called “block” in analyzing what constitutes a failure of reference in a predicative statement involving a proper name. When the

historical explanation of the use of a name (with the intention to refer) ends in the way with events that preclude any referent being identified, block occurs. When the unfamiliar history of the speaker's use of the name does not end in the right way as what one thought in the past, failure of reference happens. The name one uses and the description of it may be just fortuitous historically.

Accordingly, Donnellan suggests a rule via the notion of block to analyze the truth conditions for negative existence statements. To ensure the rule work, two things are required: first, a means of collecting all the uses of the proper name in predicative statements should be established. Second, the proper names, if needed, should be substituted another one within similar or the same collection or type. Thus, in tracing back several uses of the proper name, or possible use of the proper name, by different speakers, a common root and certain connections may be found out historically. The effect is significant in that the identifying description has nothing to do with the existence or nonexistence about the proper name.

In the last section, Donnellan comes to a natural conclusion that he may probably provide a solution to certain problems concerning predicative statements with proper names, particularly in the discussion of nonexistence statements.

2. Reaction Towards Donnellan's "Speaking of Nothing"

After a close reading of Donnellan's "Speaking of Nothing", it is found that his in-depth analysis of the two puzzles - the problem of identity statements and the problem of the nonexistent statements, is clearly demonstrated. Besides, Donnellan attempts to provide feasible solutions to these problems by inventing new terms, even though he seems not confident enough when facing the two giants (Frege and Russell) in the field of philosophy of language.

Based on the research of Frege and Russell, Donnellan prefers to compare pairs of key concepts before giving his supplementing or refutation. The first pair picked up by Donnellan is to see the essential distinction between "Discourse about fiction" and "Discourse about actuality", which is actually "a matter of presupposition about the intent of the speech act". The sample provided by Donnellan is the movie *Doctor Strangelove*, which is actually a fiction. When someone, who is not familiar with this film and regards it as a documentary, says, "Doctor Strangelove, the top military scientist in the United States, is a psychopath.", Donnellan asserts that the speaker would be probably talking "a bit of discourse about reality". To be honest, Donnellan may sound subjective on this point, for there is no sign of any intent of the speaker by saying that sentence, and the speaker is referring to a person about reality in this case because movie is just a movie, and even documentary movie can not be identical to reality.

Comparatively speaking, the second pair of concepts, existence statements and negative existence statements, is clearer for a common reader to follow. The former refers to either the form "S does not exist" or the form "S exists", while the latter is when there is no referent for the singular expressions. The distinction among the third pair of concepts is quite historical, as "denying the existence of something altogether" and "denying its present existence or its existence at some point or during some period in time" conforms to one of the theory of Dialectics. According to online Psychology Wiki [2], one main principle of dialectics is "Everything is transient and finite, existing in the medium of time", which literally emphasizes the flow of time, change and limitation of things. Therefore, there is no absolute possibility for things

in the world. It is reasonable to approve or deny things for certain points at certain time in history. Apart from all the terms mentioned above, Donnellan continues to mention and analyze other pairs, like “singular terms in ordinary language” and “genuine” names, “historical explanation theory” and “casual theory of perception” and the other terms. It is wise for Donnellan to introduce such similar philosophical terms to lay a path for the readers to go into his own garden of philosophy. However, since some terms are not easy to distinguish even among themselves, Donnellan has not come up with any definition or formula yet but only differentiated them by giving examples, which, to a common reader, is not sufficient enough.

After the comparison of those pairs of concepts, Donnellan tries hard to propose his own and new theory in a modest way, which actually works little to solve the philosophical puzzles left by Russell. Although Donnellan purports three key concepts: the historical explanation theory, an omniscient observer of history and a “block” in the history, he provides no definition for them by just describing and presenting examples, thus reducing his power of persuasion in the argument. As a matter of fact, Donnellan’s historical explanation theory is not a new concept in history. It could be understood as “an explanation of certain events that have taken place in reality” or “an explanation of a circumstance or phenomena in the context of history”. Donnellan’s so-called new theory should belong to the second one, which is used to interpret the language phenomena in the context of history. From this regard, language is mutual in itself, with literal note or explanation in dictionary. Instead, the meaning could be achieved only when people use it as a tool to communicate either in a spoken form or a written way. This is especially true for the polysemant, a word with more than one definition, because the exact meaning of such a word can be understood and confirmed only in a specific context.

Then, the next new concept created by Donnellan- “an omniscient observer of history” sounds unreal and proves to be implausible. In narration, stories can be told from an omniscient point of view when the narrator knows and sees everything that all the characters are experiencing. However, it is really unconvincing to label anyone to be an omniscient observer of history because history is not created by one individual but by people as a whole unit. It is true that Socrates, Homer, Shakespeare and Gaius Julius Caesar are important figures in western history, and it is also true that a conclusion like “Socrates is a virtuous person” can be universally drawn because Socrates himself could probably be a lazy husband, rebellious mountain villagers, ambitious politician, and other images with the list going on. Just like one thousand men have one thousand ways to interpret Hamlet, one hundred men of course will have a hundred men of Socrates, for the reason that there does not exist an omniscient observer of history.

Compared with the previous two concepts mentioned above, Donnellan’s third idea- a “block” in the history- is more convincing and interesting. According to the Collins online dictionary [3], there are eleven definitions for “block”, four verbs, six nouns and one phrase. After reading Donnellan and the dictionary, it is advisable to choose one of the noun to connect the two together as what “block” is and how it functions in the field of philosophy of language. In Collins online dictionary, if people have a mental block or a block, they are “temporarily unable to do something” that they “can normally do which involves using, thinking about, or remembering something”. In Donnellan’s view, a “block” happens “when the historical explanation of the use of a name (with the intention to refer) ends in this way with events that preclude any referent being identified”. This definition just coincides with Dunning-Kruger effect,

which comes from a combination of two men, Justin Kruger and David Dunning from Cornell University. Therefore, the core of Dunning-Kruger is a mismatch or gap between self and others.

So, it is usually adopted by many researcher in fields like language learning, brain cognition, neuro perception and some other subjects. For example, Saito et al. (2020) [4] conducted a research concerning the mismatch between self-assessment and other-assessment in classroom of second language learning from a longitudinal perspective as long as one academic semester and found out that high performers and low performers show great difference towards alignment. Coincidentally, the mismatch or gap between self and other in Dunning-Kruger effect well corresponds with what Donnellan calls a “block” and the example given by him is also easy to follow. An example is a case in point to respond to the conception of the “block”. A child who were once very convinced that Santa Claus would come to the house from chimney now learns (from school teachers, stories or any other sources) the fact that the referent (Santa Claus) that he once believed to be true is just mistaken and does not exist. Surprise, anger, disillusion and self realization may occur to the kid, and that is the moment of a “block”. In this way, it is quite natural that each individual may probably experience such a moment in their growth, and the different stages in a kid’s cognition clearly show that things are not unchanged forever. Each individual’s value cognition, knowledge and ability is a process in the history of human being, and that is why historical explanation theory is so significant and necessary in analyzing man’s thinking activities and social behaviors and why such a theory can make Donnellan’s insight resounding.

Nevertheless, a doubt simultaneously occurs as how to apply the notion of a block to solve the puzzles of negative existence statements. Referring to the Santa Claus sample may provide some hints. Based on the referential theory, a word has sense only when it can be designated with an actual object or thing in the real world. So the singular expression Santa Claus has no referent at all because no individual or thing can be picked up from the world to match it. It seems that Santa Claus has no sense or no meaning at all in the referential theory. However, Santa Claus does carry meaning at least to the kid who once believed it so much. When the kid grows older and has more knowledge and experience, he or she realizes the past mistaken concept and image of the so called Santa Claus. Following the same logic, [Santa Claus does not exist] is true if and only if the history of those uses (mistaken referent in the past) ends in a block, that is, when the kid realizes the past mistaken conception. As this is a stage in a kid’s growth, it is also part of the kid’s history. Thus, negative existence statements can be true and expresses proposition from such a historical point of view.

Finally, the reading and analysis of Donnellan suggests that philosophy of language is not just about language itself; it is also about the social activities that each individual is associated with. Whatever seen, felt, touched, smelled, talked, described and written is connected to certain viewer or speaker in a specific context in this world. Without men to feel the cold and the heat, the temperature, high or low, makes no sense at all; without men’s interpretation, language is just a string of words or marks stored in dictionary, with no “right” or “wrong”, no “good” or “bad”, no “significant” or “trivial”.

3. Conclusions

In a word, language is not only a mark (symbol, name) or a mental activity, but also a social phenomenon. In the study of philosophy of language, linguists aim to better understand the internal mechanism of language while philosophers focus on human understanding condensed in language, thus interpreting the world via the tool of language. Anyway, as Chen (2013) [5] comments, for all the puzzles in philosophy, there is no definite answer or solution but only constant new enlightenment (p.108).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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