

Millian Descriptivism and the *de se*

Abstract

In a wide range of work, Scott Soames has defended Millianism – the thesis that the semantic contents of proper names and indexicals are just their referents – against objections derived from Frege’s puzzle. In doing so, he has elaborated a conception of the relationship between naming and assertion which has been labeled *Millian Descriptivism*. One of the central claims of Millian Descriptivism is that Fregean intuitions about the cognitive significance of proper names can be explained by appealing to a distinction between the literal semantic contents of sentences containing proper names on the one hand, and the propositions which are asserted by assertive utterances of those sentences on the other. On the Millian Descriptivist picture, once we allow that the proposition asserted by an assertive utterance of a sentence *S* in a context *C* need not be the proposition *p* semantically expressed by *S* in *C*, but instead could be some descriptive enrichment of *p*, then the door is opened for a quasi-Fregean pragmatic solution to Frege’s puzzle which is compatible with a Millian semantics.

A question which Soames has not explicitly addressed is whether Millian Descriptivism can give a satisfactory account of the problem of the cognitive significance of indexicals. To take one of the many examples of the phenomenon, consider John Perry’s messy shopper, Sarah, who, upon seeing a shopper on a CCTV screen trailing sugar around the supermarket, says to herself:

(1) She is making a mess.

Unbeknownst to Sarah, it is in fact she herself who is making a mess. When she realizes this, she exclaims:

(2) I am making a mess.

Sarah’s utterances of (1) and (2) both semantically express the same singular proposition which predicates, of Sarah, the property of making a mess. Nonetheless, there seems to be an obvious distinction in the cognitive significance of the two sentences. This problem is also known in the literature as the problem of the *de se*.

In this paper I argue that Millian Descriptivism does not, in fact, give a satisfactory account of the *de se* – at least on a plausible interpretation of the theory’s commitments concerning the nature of cognitive significance. I go on to suggest a number of ways in which the theory could be modified in order to handle such cases. The upshot of the discussion is that much more needs to be said about how Millian Descriptivism construes (a) the metaphysics of belief, and (b) the relationship between the beliefs of speakers and hearers on the one hand, and the propositions asserted by assertive utterances on the other.