

SOME PROBLEMS FOR PREDICATIVISM

ABSTRACT

Predicativism, which ultimately goes back to [Burge \(1973\)](#), is the view that names are predicates. The-predicativism ([Larson and Segal \(1995\)](#), [Elbourne \(2005\)](#), [Fara \(2015\)](#), among others) adds to this the claim that when names occur with no overt determiner or plural morphology they are accompanied by a covert definite determiner. Names are thus definite descriptions. In this paper, I present some problems for The-predicativism, in the form of three cases in which names don't behave like definite descriptions. Firstly, I'll point to referential uses of names accompanied by an overt indefinite article, as in 'A young Mozart visited Vienna'. I'll show that these are roughly interchangeable with names with an overt definite, and suggest that this is a piece of data the the-predicativist ought to, but cannot, account for. Secondly, it's generally held that definites have a uniqueness requirement: to be felicitously used, it's necessary that text or context narrow the domain of the definite's noun phrase to one object. I'll suggest that the fineness of conjunctive name phrases like as in 'John and John lived in Dunne hall' shows that names lack this requirement. Finally, appealing to what Hans Kamp ([Kamp \(2015\)](#)) calls introductory uses of names, where one uses a name to one unfamiliar with its bearer, I'll argue the the-predicativist can't account for these either, roughly because the normal use of definites is to speak of fa-

miliar entities. The overall conclusion is that the the-predicativists' positing of a covert definite determiner is undermined.

1 INTRODUCTION

Millianism is the view that the semantic content of a name is simply its bearer. Its attractions are familiar: it is pleasingly commonsensical; it offers the simplest account of the semantics of sentences containing names in argument position, and it can explain the notable indifference of names to world and time shifting operators.

But the Millian has problems. In this paper, I consider one, dating back to [Burge \(1973\)](#), which has recently seen a resurgence in interest both in linguistics and philosophy, namely the fact that names often behave just like common count nouns. Just as we have:

- (1) Most cats are Portuguese
- (2) There's one dog in Hull
- (3) Cats from Alaska are usually scary.

So we have:

- (4) Most Julianas are Portuguese
- (5) There's one Alfred in Hull
- (6) Sarahs from Alaska are usually scary.

It appears that just as 'dog' holds of a something just in case it's a dog, so 'Juliana' has a use on which it holds of something just in case he, she, or it is called Juliana (for an explanation of why I used and not mentioned the name, see [Fara](#). For more general discussion about *being called* see [Gray \(2014\)](#)). The problem for the Millian is simple and serious: if names simply denote objects, they are of the wrong semantic type to compose with determiners, which look for predicate type meanings. Accordingly, in order to accommodate such uses, the Millian will have to posit some sort of ambiguity. If names denote objects, then they also denote properties (for discussion of the ambiguity view, see [Leckie \(2013\)](#)).

Predicativists think they can do without ambiguity. They hold that names are predicates, and can thereby account for the cases above for free. The problem for the predicativist is to account for simple sentences such as:

- (7) Juliana swam

If names are simply predicates, this should not be interpretable, but clearly it is. The paradigm predicativist move is to hold that we can capture such cases if we assume that there's a covert, unpronounced determiner preceding the name. To date, there's been two views as to what this determiner is. For Burge, it was a demonstrative determiner (for arguments against this, see [Fara \(2015\)](#)). Most contemporary writers, however, assume that it's a definite. This view gains support from consideration of both English and other languages. In English, names occur, functioning referentially, with overt articles. In particular, as Fara shows, they occur when the definite is stressed, or when the name is followed by a restrictive modifier, or preceded either by a non-restrictive or a restrictive modifier. Here are some examples (based on [Fara \(2015\)](#), 90)

- (8) *The* Marc Jacobs is standing outside your window (you mean it's not my neighbour Marc Jacobs?)
- (9) The Ivan on the roof is howling (the one in the cellar is sleeping)
- (10) The shorter John is teaching ethics, while the bigger is teaching political philosophy
- (11) The ever-popular Michael is teaching ethics this year

Moreover, in many languages names occur with overt definites, as witness, for example, the Italian (for extensive cross-linguistic discussion, see [Matshansky \(2008\)](#)):

- (12) La Maria dorme
THE MARIA SLEEPS
MARIA SLEEPS

On this basis, the the-predicativist assumes the LF of our sentence is as so, where the empty set sign indicates unpronouncedness:

- (13) [[\emptyset _{THE} Juliana] [swam]]

The-predicativism comes with certain theoretical responsibilities. Most notably, it's necessary to give an account of the *incompleteness* and *rigidity* of names (for a forceful recent statement of the challenge, and discussion of extant solutions, see Schoubye (forthcoming)). In this paper, I'm going to assume that there is such an account available. My critical point will be that even if so, the-predicativism can't account for all the uses of names we would like.

My strategy will be to present three features which definites typically have, and show that names don't exhibit these features. The behaviour of names is different to that of definites along several dimensions. I will use this fact to suggest that we should be wary of positing a covert definite: it is undermotivated. Of the three features, one is roughly speaking syntactic, one semantic, and one pragmatic. I will treat them in turn.

2 AGAINST A SYNTACTIC ARGUMENT FOR THE-PREDICATIVISM

In this section, I want to consider a very interesting syntactic argument Fara gives for the-predicativism (81ff). Here's how I take this argument to go. The interaction of names and definites is a mess: sometimes we can, and sometimes we cannot, use a definite with a name. For example:

- (14) I'm going for dinner with John
- (15) *I'm going for dinner with the John
- (16) THE John Calvin likes candy
- (17) John Calvin likes candy
- (18) young John enjoyed football
- (19) The young John enjoyed football
- (20) *ever-popular Michael is teaching ethics this year
- (21) The ever-popular Michael is teaching ethics this year
- (22) The John who wrote the song is talented
- (23) *John who wrote the song is talented

It seems to be the case that names can take an overt definite when preceded by a restrictive or non-restrictive modifier (19,21),¹ when followed by a restrictive modifier (22), or when the definite is stressed (16). This seems like a mess.

But Fara (building on work from Sloat (1969) and Matushansky (2008)) thinks that if we assume that, when occurring without an overt article, there is a covert one, we can explain much of the data with one simple rule:

Article Rule. The definite article must appear as \emptyset_{THE} when it has a name as its sister, unless it is stressed. (Fara (2015), 93)

If this were so, it would undoubtedly be a strong argument in favour of predicativism. However, I think that the data is yet more complex than Fara realises.

The complexity arises from the existence of referential uses of names accompanied by overt indefinite articles. Here is an example:

- (24) In 1840, a young Tolstoy visited Moskow for the first time, and would later write about it extensively.

There are several things to note about this. Firstly, it's a completely natural sentence, and constructions like this are common both in English and cross-linguistically. Secondly, they have a well understood semantics in terms of quantification over stages (for both the cross-linguistic point, and the semantics, see, for example Paul (1994), Gärtner (2004), Von Heusinger and Wespel (2007)). They're not outliers, and deserve our attention. Thirdly, and importantly, note that in the above sentence, replacing the indefinite with a definite more or less preserves sense:

- (25) In 1840, the young Tolstoy visited Moskow for the first time, and would later write about it extensively.

If this sounds slightly awkward, try prefacing it with 'St Petersburg wasn't the only source of literary inspiration'.²

¹ I assume Fara's diagnostic for non-restrictiveness: "If someone who believes that there is only one F can sincerely utter a sentence containing the phrase 'M F', where M is a modifier, then the modifier M can have a nonrestrictive interpretation in that sentence." (85).

² Although the definite and indefinite are readily interchangeable here, this isn't always so. In general, modifiers which express more temporary properties prefer indefinites, while more permanent properties favour definites. Thus: 'At a party in Paris the sixties, a (#the) drunk Tolstoy

But given this, then it seems that any theory in the business of working out the distribution of names with overt definites should also be in the business of working out the distribution of names with overt indefinites. The relevant pair is not 18 and 19 as above, but rather:

- (26) Young John enjoyed football
 (27) The\ a young John enjoyed football

But now it seems that the positing of a covert definite will be of no aid in helping us predict the distribution of examples like 27, since one would need to predict the fact that the article may be realised as an indefinite.

Let me consider a reply to this. One might think that the behaviour of names with overt indefinites is simply irrelevant: it's a separate issue, specific indefinites are notoriously complex, and one can't expect a theorist to do everything. In reply, I would emphasise the similarity in discourse roles and truth conditions exhibited by 'the young Tolstoy' and 'a young Tolstoy'. This striking similarity suggests to me that any theory which can account for one but not the other is missing out something crucial. I agree in general that you can't expect a theorist to do everything, but I think it's reasonable in this case to expect a unified account, given the seeming unity in the data.

But if we do so, then Fara's postulation of a covert definite doesn't explain the data as she thinks it does, and so one of her central reasons for opting for the-predicativism is undermined.

3 A UNIQUENESS PROBLEM

It's widely held that definites come with a uniqueness constraint: to be felicitously used, it must be the case that there's a way of narrowing down the domain of the description's head noun phrase so that its extension is a singleton. Famously, of course, how this is done is contested. In a relatively small number of cases, the head noun itself is semantically a singleton. This is notable with superlatives as in:

presented his theory of history for the first time', vs 'At a part in Paris in the sixties, the (#a) Russian Tolstoy defended his country against Flaubert'. However, these are only tendencies, and I don't think there are any hard and fast rules here.

(28) The last person to leave should turn off the lights

But more typically, some completion must be supplied by context. That is, in a sentence like the following, uttered in the presence of my desk, there must be some way to narrow down the domain so that the definite below manages to talk about the desk in question:

(29) The desk is heavy

How this is accomplished is unclear: it could be syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic (Stanley and Gendler Szabó (2000), Bach (2000), Dever (2004), among much else). Thankfully nothing turns on this particular question for my purposes.

That definites require uniqueness is not completely uncontroversial. Some analyses don't require uniqueness, so that—roughly speaking—definites and indefinites are semantically akin, differing only pragmatically (Szabó (2000), Ludlow and Segal (2004)). However, it's fair to say that they are in the minority.

I am going to present clear cases in which names don't require uniqueness. Accordingly, if the the-predicativist is to account for them, they must adopt one of these non-standard theories of definites. But that's an important conclusion. It has particular dialectical force against someone like Fara, who adopts a 'piggybacking' strategy (72): she says she is happy to take over whatever the right analysis of definites should turn out to be. Now she's backed into a corner: she better hope that the best theory of definites will be one which doesn't require uniqueness.

Without further ado let's consider a case. Here's an example:

Nomination. One nominates oneself for class president by writing one's name on a piece of paper and putting it in a box. We know there are several people called Sam in the class. The deadline has passed: I open the box, see two slips of paper both of which read 'Sam', read them, and remark: "Two Sams nominated themselves. I hope Sam and Sam get on."

Before going on to consider the problem, let me ward off an objection: one might feel the example is bad because it's infelicitous to conjoin two tokens

of the same name, and that a more natural continuation is 'I hope the two Sams' or 'I hope the Sams' get on. While I agree it doesn't sound great, this is not a semantic issue. A simple google search reveals many instances of two tokens of the same name type being conjoined. Here's a sampling:

- (30) John and John, both Class of '83, lived in Dunne Hall their sophomore year. (<http://www.scu.edu/scm/winter2006/learning.cfm>)
- (31) And at the feet of Jesus, and at the table where he eats, Mary and Mary both minister to Jesus. (<http://drysdale.unitingchurch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/17-Mar.pdf>)

With that said, let's see what the the-predicativist can say. If the sentence contains two definites, these definites are, as far as their overt semantic content is concerned, incomplete: the noun phrase which is the sister to the covert definite determiner, namely 'Sam', does not have a singleton extension. This is so because there are many people called Sam in the world. But now it's a condition on the use of incomplete definites that there be some way for the audience to contextually determine some singleton subset of the extension of the definite's noun phrase.

So there must be some way of narrowing the domain of the first definite 'Sam' to a singleton, and some way of narrowing the second 'Sam' down to a singleton, but it cannot be the same way, because then we'd be conjoining the same thing twice, which would result in either anomaly or incorrect truth conditions.

I claim there is no such way to narrow the domains of two definites. Neither speaker nor hearer know anything to distinguish one Sam from the other; but in order to narrow the domain of each 'Sam' down to a different Sam, one would need to be able to distinguish them. The only properties one knows to hold of one Sam one knows to hold of the other. So, for example, the property of *having self-nominated* or *being one of the two who self-nominated* will not do, because that holds of both Sams, so neither definite would end up being complete. Given speaker and hearer's epistemic impoverishment with regard to the Sams, then, both definites must be incomplete, and so the computation of the semantic value of the sentence as a whole

must crash. And so the the-predicativist incorrectly predicts the sentence is bad.

In fact, we can make the same point which the example above does more simply. Thus consider the following description of a podcast made by two people called Michael, Michael Ian Black and Michael Showalter:

- (32) In this segment, Michael and Michael announce the winners of the "Is This Art?" contest and determine whether or not the pictures that were chosen are art or not (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/topics/id662902268?mt=2>)

This, I take it, is perfectly natural. But it's plausible that, even though the writer has ways of distinguishing the Michaels, in writing the first 'Michael', he or she didn't have either Michael in mind, and ditto for the second 'Michael'. And so the context doesn't appear to provide two different singleton restrictors, one for each occurrence of 'Michael'. But intuitively, this doesn't matter: it's sufficient that the phrase as a whole stands for both Michaels, and it's not necessary that the speaker make his or her mind up about which 'Michael' stands for which Michael. But for the definite theorist, it is necessary, as the domain of each occurrence of 'Michael' will have to have a singleton extension. So the the-predicativist places requirements on the speaker that just don't seem to be there. Examples like this can be supplied ad nauseam.

Let's consider an objection to this, the famous bishop sentences which purport to show that one *can* felicitously use, in one sentence, a pair of identical definites to refer to two individuals. Here is the example:

- (33) When a bishop meets a bishop, the bishop blesses the bishop

Given that, one might think, this whole argument just breaks down: we can say that what we have here are bishop sentences, and even if how bishop sentences work is obscure, it's not an obscurity that the the-predicativist need overly concern themselves with.

My reply to this is basically that, although the above example is perhaps just about okay, it's nevertheless somewhat forced and unnatural, and it's

hard to think of many other examples. By contrast, it's not too hard to find examples of conjoined names in the wild.³

Another point is that it seems that it seems very difficult to get non-anaphoric bishop sentences. To my ear, the following sounds very bad:

Presidents. We're at a reception at the French embassy in Washington: Hollande and Obama are across the room. I say:

(34) The president and the president are deep in conversation

By contrast, it's not difficult to find uncontroversially non-anaphoric conjoined names. The ones I've presented already show this, but here's another example. The blurb of the book *The World Economy: Trade And Finance* reads:

By presenting the fundamentals of international economics clearly with a strong presentation of theory, policy and applications, *The World Economy: Trade and Finance* is an excellent choice for a broad range of trade and finance courses with an international economic focus. This text is believed to be the most technically accurate text available on the market. Yarbrough and Yarbrough's mission with this text[...]

Trying to replace the names here with definites like 'the author' or even 'the co-author' just sounds terrible.

So here is my reply: bishop sentences are marginally acceptable, and not common. Moreover, they're even more hard to get in non-anaphoric cases. Accordingly if our explanation of conjoined names is that they are bishop sentences, they should be much less frequent and forced than in fact they are. So I conclude that that *shouldn't* be our explanation, and so the predicativist has a problem with conjoined names.

³ And a google search bears this out: it's hard to find examples not from the philosophical literature. By contrast, conjoined names are common. If the reader doubts this, I suggest they google their name (or, if their name is somewhat rare, a more common name of their choosing) followed by some non-distributive predicate ('met' is a good one). For what it's worth, I share my name with someone close to me, and encounter the construction all the time.

4 INTRODUCTORY USES OF NAMES

Finally, I want to consider what Hans Kamp (Kamp (2015), 290) calls introductory uses of names. Normally, it's a condition on the felicitous use of a name that both speaker and hearer know, in the everyday sense, who the bearer is and that they go by the name. If I have a friend called Carrie, and you don't know her, I can't say, if we're talking about running:

(35) Carrie likes running

The conversation would stall: you would try to think of a mutual acquaintance of ours called Carrie, and failing, would be confused. And one might think that this is a good data point for the predicativist. After all, there's some obscure sense in which one typically uses definites to speak of entities familiar to the conversation, and so the unfamiliarity of Carrie could explain the infelicitousness of the definite 'Carrie'.

But there are also uses in which one doesn't presume one's audience to know who the bearer of a name is: uses in which one *introduces* one's audience to the bearer. Here is the sort of case I have in mind. Imagine a historian beginning a lecture by saying':

(36) Robert Russell was an obscure soldier in the Crimean war. I found his diary, and today I'm going to tell you about it.

The point of such an utterance is to introduce Robert Russell to one's previously unfamiliar audience. It's interesting to note that it's playing the same sort of role as a specific indefinite would in this case. Consider the following, which conveys a similar content:

(37) I found the diary of an obscure soldier. I'm going to tell you about him today.

Can the the-predicativist explain introductory uses? The most obvious place to look is at the phenomenon of *accommodation*. It's a familiar point that one can use a definite even in case one's audience didn't previously know that just one object satisfied its descriptive content. I can perfectly well say:

(38) I couldn't come because my cat got sick

Even if you don't know that I have a cat, safe in the knowledge that you will quietly come to assume it from now on. One might think the same thing is happening here: the audience accommodates the existence of someone called Robert Russell.

This reply seems problematic to me. The reason for this is that it promises to overgenerate. Say that we can accommodate unfamiliar names. Why does it not happen much more frequently? Recall again 35: why can't the occurrence of 'Carrie' be accommodated? Or again, why can't the occurrence of 'The Carrie I live with' in the following be accommodated?

(39) The Carrie I live with likes running

This will be met with similar confusion as 35. But it's a familiar point that we can accommodate most any definite. Even something like the following causes little problem:

(40) Sorry I'm late, I got bitten by my former mother-in-law's parrot.

Even if you didn't know I had a former mother-in-law and a fortiori that she had a pet parrot. So why can't we accommodate any name, if names are definites? Any answer, it would seem, would need to appeal to a difference between definites and names, which will thus undermine the the-predicativist's view that definites and names are deep down the same.

Here's another possible response, which I think falls foul of essentially the same problem. There's a use of definites typically found in novels which is similar to, but has a slightly different feel from, accommodation. It's used to create a sense of immersion in the story, so that the reader feels they are jumping in to activity already underway. Here's an example:

(41) The door banged shut, and the guard looked up with shock.

This is a completely fine way to begin a story. On the other hand, it would be distinctly weird for me to start telling an anecdote to my brother in this way, even with suitable scene setting.

Once we've realised that this sort of use exists, we might think it can be used to help the the-predicativist account for cases like 36: we're trying to achieve that same dramatic, in medias res feel to our history lesson, and that explains why it's good.

I think the problem with this is the same as the problem with the accommodation view: while it could maybe serve to explain the goodness of 36, it would seem to predict the goodness also of 35 and 39, which are incorrect predictions. Accordingly, I don't think this response works either, and so I think it's unclear that the the-predicativist is able to explain introductory uses by means of antecedently recognised features of definites, and this weakens the-predicativism.

5 CONCLUSION

The the-predicativist argues that names are definite descriptions. If this is so, then we should expect them to behave like definite descriptions. My aim in this essay has been to show that this expectation is not borne out. Names have a range of behaviours which differentiates them from definites: they occur with overt indefinite articles, they seem to lack a uniqueness requirement, and they can be used to introduce new entities into the discussion in a novel way. In light of this, there is good reason to doubt that names are definite descriptions, and thus to doubt the-predicativism.

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