Bad Practices

Unintended consequences of practice-based theories of reference

Abstract

Practice theories are a genus of causal theories of reference. They claim that the semantic referent of an utterance of a name is determined by features of a practice of using that name to speaker-refer to, or coordinate actions around, a certain object. Practices might extend beyond the utterance, so the reference of some utterances is determined by future events. This entails no commitment on when facts about these future events are themselves determined; one might say they are determined as they happen (and are indeterminate beforehand) or that they are determinate at all times (including beforehand). The practice theory entails unacceptable consequences on either view. On the first, some utterances will have their referent determined once after some future events, then determined again, differently after further events: one utterance may have different semantic referents at different times. This entails similar, unacceptable, consequence for truth and epistemic status. On the second, there are cases of systematic and consistent semantic error which are indistinguishable from cases of systematic success. These are common and imperceptible enough that for all we know, this phenomenon may be very widespread, suggesting we should be sceptical of our knowledge of the semantics of our utterances.

Practice theories are a genus of causal theories of reference, advanced by Sainsbury (2003, 2005), Michaelson (2023), and deRosset (2020). They claim that the semantic referent of an utterance of a name is determined by features of a *practice* of using that name to refer to, or coordinate actions around, a certain object. One motivation for this is that such views can distinguish merely mistaken uses of a name from unintentional baptisms. When I make a mistake, I use the wrong name for something, and that is the end of it. But when I unintentionally baptise something, I use the wrong name for a thing, and as a result the name comes to refer to that thing, at least in some instances. The practice theory says that this is because the latter use leads to a practice of using the name in the relevant way, whereas the former does not. This means that semantic facts about an utterance can be determined by occurences *after* the utterance. So the practice theory must reject:

Retrospection. *All of the facts which determine the reference of a given utterance of a name N are either antecedent to or concurrent with that utterance.*

In this paper, I argue that the practice theory's rejection of Retrospection leads to unacceptable consequences. Section 1 motivates and describes practice theories. My objection comes in Section 2: the practice theory entails no commitment on when the facts which determine an utterance's semantics (perhaps facts about the future of that utterance) become determined—one might think they are determinate at all times, or that they only become determinate as that future occurs. I argue that both views lead to undesirable consequences for the practice theorist. On the first picture ('Graduality', 2.1) I show that practice theories are committed to cases where the reference of an utterance of a name can be retrospectively changed by later events. This alone seems highly implausible to me, but it also leads to problematic retrospective changes in truth, moral valence and knowledge status. On the second picture ('Determinacy', 2.2), there are cases of systematic and consistent semantic error which are indistinguishable from cases of systematic success. Worse, since these cases can arise easily and are undetectable, this phenomenon may be very widespread, suggesting we should be sceptical of our knowledge of the semantics of our utterances. In Section 3 I consider where all this leaves a practice theorist who bites the bullet: I show this leaves no role left for a notion of semantic reference in ordinary language or philosophy, so it is not clear what the practice theory is for, and I comment briefly on what this tells us about the adequacy of theories of reference in general. Section 4 considers and rejects two potential responses.

1 The practice theory

Practice theories are a genus of causal theories of reference. Causal theories primarily discuss the reference of utterances—not the names uttered. Some utterances are special—they are (or are involved in) speech acts which associate the uttered name with an object. These special utterances are called *baptisms*. Further utterances of the name, which are connected to the baptism by *reference-preserving links*, will refer to whatever object was involved in the baptism. The origin of such theories is generally attributed to Kripke (1980, pp. 96–7). The practice theories I will discuss are only concerned with theories of proper names and singular reference.[1]

On a very simple causal theory, reference preservation is just a matter of being a causal descendant of the baptism: all utterances of the same name which are caused by a certain baptism will refer to the object baptised.

But a picture like this is clearly wrong. Evans (1973) points out that there are cases where an utterance of a name N clearly refers to some object $O2$, but there is

[1]Practice theories bear a stong resemblance to Temporal Externalism. I discuss their relation at more length in 4.2.

an unbroken chain of causal links back to a baptism of some *other* object $O1$. Evans quotes such a case from Taylor (1896):

> In the case of 'Madagascar' a hearsay report of Malay or Arab sailors misunderstood by Marco Polo … has had the effect of transferring a corrupt form of the name of a portion of the African mainland to the great African Island.

In this case, the original baptism associated the name 'Madagascar' with a portion of the mainland, and there is clearly an unbroken chain of causal links joining modern uses of the name with this baptism. But the modern uses refer to the island, not the area of the mainland. The simple causal theory cannot explain such 'switching' cases.

One response is to distinguish at least one of the utterances between the original baptism and the present as a baptism of $O2$ with the name N (which was previously used only for $O1$). This might seem simple: baptisms must include some sort of relation to the object other than a reference-preserving link (speaker reference, perception, having-in-mind, etc.). Whatever this is, there will be some first utterance which bears that relation to $O2$—that utterance is the baptism, and the following utterances will be related (by the same kind of reference-preserving links) to this later baptism, and thus refer to $O2$.

But this simple picture is wrong too. Suppose there is such an utterance, which relates to $O2$ in the relevant way, but apart from this everyone goes on using the name as before, with the pattern of use centred entirely on $O1$. On the simple response above, all these later utterances refer to $O2$, since they are causal descendants of the baptism of that object with the relevant name. Using their utterances to coordinate their actions around $O1$, the speakers will be systemically mistaken. This seems wrong though: a single misplaced utterance should not bring it about that all subsequent utterances are systematically in error.

So what is needed is a way to distinguish mistaken uses from baptisms (specifically, baptisms involving a name which has already been used to baptise something else).

One attractive answer is unavailable: one might appeal to the *intentions* of speakers and claim it is a necessary condition of an utterance being a baptism that the speaker intend it to be so. But in real examples of the kind Evans considers (including 'Madagascar'), there is no intentional baptism. In fact the speakers' intentions are often the opposite: to go on using the name exactly as those before them did. If we accept that the solution to the switching problem is that there is a baptism somewhere along the way, then unintentional baptisms must be possible (see also deRosset 2020, sec.1 for an extensive discussion of why appeals to intention fail).

Practice theories are designed to accommodate this—to distinguish mistaken uses of a name from (unintentional) baptisms, without appeal to intention. The headline claim

of practice theories is that an utterance of a name is a baptism of an object (intentional or otherwise) just if it leads to a social practice linking the name with the object.[2]

In more detail, practice theories include the following commitments. First, that utterances can relate to objects by some relation other than semantic reference. Sainsbury (2005, ch.3) calls the relation 'speaker reference'. Michaelson (2023, p. 1439) says that utterances can be used to 'coordinate thoughts and actions on' objects. deRosset (2020) writes of 'using the name to refer' to an object, which he contrasts with the name's/utterances's semantic reference. I will use Sainsbury's term and say that utterances *speaker-refer* to things, that (some) utterances have a *speaker-referent*, etc, but nothing rests on this—my usage is intended to cover any of these relations between utterance and object.

Secondly, that utterances can form social practices, generally practices of using the uttered name to speaker-refer to some object. Theories differ on which utterances together form a practice. Common to *all* practice theories though is the claim that those utterances which form a practice are related by some grouping or relation among their speaker-referents. Michaelson says utterances of the same name form a practice if used 'routinely' to speaker-refer to the same thing. (2023, p. 1439) On Sainsbury's account, a later utterance of a name is part of the same practice as an earlier utterance 'only if [the later utterance] is sensitive to information from an earlier use in the same practice'. (2005, p. 117) Sainsbury never defines information, or explains what such sensitivity is. deRosset gives no explicit formulation but relies on a similar notion of practices (e.g. from page 17).

None of the theorists I discuss have a developed theory of the nature of practices. There is a rich literature on this and related questions, (see e.g. Cetina, Schatzki, and Savigny 2005, for an overview), including their relevance to metasemantics (Rouse 2007; Tanesini 2014) but the commitments required for the practice theories I discuss are not affected by any stance on these issues. The only ontological commitment necessary is one Michaelson, Sainsbury and deRosset all share: that if there are many causally linked utterances of a name, most of which speaker-refer to a certain object, then there is a practice centered on that object which involves those and related utterances (everything else they agree on is specific to how speaker and semantic reference relate to these practices—largely orthogonal to the metaphysics of practices themselves).

Third, every referring[3] practice includes at least one baptism (intentional or otherwise) of exactly one object.[4] The semantic referent of any utterance in the practice is

[2]A different approach to this problem was developed by Evans himself (1973, 1982), with later improvements by Dickie (2011). This approach also appeals to a notion of a social practice of using a name, but characterises it very differently, and does not reject Retrospection. My discussion is not concerned with this alternative approach.

[3]Sainsbury's model includes 'empty' baptisms, which ground the practices of empty names. This does not affect my objection, so my discussion is limited to referring utterances, in practices with a baptised *object*.

[4]I.e. no practice includes two baptisms of different objects, though a single practice might include

the object baptised. All practice theories seem to agree that it is irrelevant whether such a baptism was intended by the speaker, though the exact relation between baptisms and practices also differs between theories. For Michaelson, an utterance of a name N is an unintentional baptism of an object O just if it serves 'unintentionally, as the first significant step towards the establishment of a practice of using [N] to refer to [an object] O'. (Michaelson 2023, p. 1439)[5]

Sainsbury's model is more complex. A baptism alone counts as a practice, as does a baptism followed by any number of utterances which share causal and 'informational' links with the baptism. Sainsbury also has a notion of *initiation* of a user into a practice. A speaker is initiated into a pre-existing practice *P* just if the event of their putative initiation is 'the first in a series of causally linked uses in which, *for the most part*, the user's speaker referent coincides with the semantic referent of P'. (Sainsbury 2005, 113-4 emphasis mine) Importantly, it is not necessary that this first utterance speaker-refer to the object baptised in P, just that *most* of the following, causally linked utterances do.

deRosset (2020, p. 17) continues:

> I will call the social practices associated with the use of a name or other expression to refer to something a referential practice. The 'Morning Star'-Venus practice is a practice of referring to Venus, rather than, say, Sirius, in virtue of a complex array of facts, including that its participants by and large take assertive 'Morning Star' utterances to be true or false depending on the features of Venus (rather, say, than Sirius); that there are 'Morning Star' experts to whom its participants by and large defer, and who know enough of the astronomical facts to single out Venus as the referent of 'Morning Star', etc. This suggests that the originator's use of 'Morning Star' refers to Venus in virtue of being part of (in fact, the original part of) the 'Morning Star'-Venus practice.

A corollary of this commitment is that the relation of being-in-the-same-practice-as is reference-preserving; all utterances in a practice must have the same referent (if any), because semantic reference is or is determined by[6] membership of a practice.

With all this in hand, practice theories can distinguish unintentional baptisms from mistakes. The former result in a new/different practice and the latter do not, though in other respects they are the same. This is why practice theories must reject Retrospection—what distinguishes mistakes from unintentional baptisms are facts

two baptisms of the *same* object, the second being in some sense redundant.

[5]Michaelson does not give an explicit account of *intentional* baptisms. He is explicit that the purpose of his account is just to distinguish unintentional baptisms from mere mistakes. (2023, p. 1446) This is compatible with various accounts of intentional baptisms.

[6]It is not clear to me whether deRosset, Michaelson or Sainsbury's are theories of the *metaphysics* of reference (i.e. to refer *is* to have certain role in a social practice) or just the *distribution* of reference (utterances with such-and-such roles in social-practices in fact refer to such-and-such objects, whatever 'refer' means). The distinction should not make a difference to my objection.

about what happens *after* the relevant utterance. In a word then: the practice theory claims that the semantic referent of an utterance of a name is the most common speaker-referent of the utterance's practice, that which practice it belongs to is a matter of which baptism it follows, and finally that whether a certain utterance is a baptism might depend on events after that utterance.[7]

In a similar vein, the practice theories cited above claim that the semantic referent of the initial utterance in a switching case is the later referent; that if U is the first utterance of 'Madagascar' which speaker-refers to the island (and stands at the beginning of the modern practice of so referring), then the semantic referent of U is the island, not a portion of the African mainland. This separate claim also requires rejecting Retrospection, since what fixes the referent of the initial utterance U is the practice (or lack of a practice) which *follows it*.

The principle Retrospection is lifted directly from Michaelson (2023), who explicitly rejects it (e.g. on p.1439). Sainsbury (2005, p.109, p.113) and deRosset (2020, p. 20) are also explicit that events in the future of an utterance can affect its semantics.

This is not as strange as it might appear. Utterances are events,[8] and events can have properties which are determined by occurrences *after* the event. Here is Michaelson's example:

Affair. *The Chesapeake-Leopard Affair helped to precipitate the War of 1812.*

It is true that The Chesapeake-Leopard Affair helped to precipitate the War of 1812, but only because of events *after the fact*—the affair was in 1807, but the war did not begin for another five years. deRosset (ibid., p. 22) relies on a similar analogy, that the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand 'started a war partly in virtue of the fact that millions showed up for the military mobilisations that *followed*' (my emphasis). I describe below why these analogies fail.

A final clarification. deRosset and Sainsbury both seem to assume that each utterance can belong to at most one practice, and thus have at most one referent. Michaelson explicitly disagrees: 'one and the same utterance of a name can both continue to partake in an old name-using practice and inaugurate a new one'. On this account:

> When we ask about the reference of an utterance of a name, we are tacitly assuming that it is clear which name-using practice is relevant to the utterance. In such cases, we have two relevant name-using practices. Relative to either, we can say what the utterance refers to
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> (Michaelson 2023, p. 1442)

I call this the *multi-practice account*. Michaelson is careful to separate this claim from the bulk of his paper, and is explicit that he will not argue for it. My discussion

[7] Similar claims are endorsed by other theories, such as Temporal Externalism. The practice theory is—uniquely—their conjunction applied to proper names.

[8] Or at least, proponents of practice theories treat them as events, as do I.

is mostly concerned with the other, more popular, type of practice theory, but I also consider the multi-practice account throughout.

2 My objection

The practice theory rejects Retrospection—it claims that the semantics of some utterance U can be fixed (sometimes, at least in part) by facts in or about the future of that utterance. In particular, by the speaker referents of utterances after U. This claim does not entail anything about when these future facts are determinate. There are two views one might reasonably hold:[9]

Graduality. *At time T, only the speaker referents of utterances made at or before T are determinate—those of utterances after T are not. (i.e. the speaker-referents of some temporally-extended set of utterances become determinate 'gradually')*

Determinacy. *At time T, the speaker-referents of all utterances (before, or after T) are determinate. Since T might be any time, the speaker referents of all utterances are determinate at all times, including times before those utterances are made.*

Holding either Graduality or Determinacy in conjunction with the practice theory will entail commitments on when semantic reference is determined. The theory says that the semantic reference of an utterance U is determined by some function of the speaker referents of the (other) utterances in U's practice (on the multi-practice account: the practice under concern). I take it that utterances which don't yet have a determinate speaker referent do not count as part of any practice.[10] So accepting the practice theory with Graduality means that, as time moves on after an utterance U (made at a time T) more and more utterances will become relevant to determining U's semantics. As U is made, only the speaker referents of those made until T are determined. But as time moves on after T, more utterances with determinate speaker referents occur, and become part of the set which determines U's semantics. So this theory is committed to a kind of semantic temporal relativism: the determination of an utterance's semantics is relative to the time from which it is evaluated.

Holding Determinacy instead of Graduality, all the semantic facts will be determinate at all times (since all the utterance-speaker-referent facts are).

I will argue that the practice theory is not satisfactory on either view of the determination of speaker reference. In section 2.1 I show that practice theorists who

[9]Both views are likely to be held in the context of wider claims about determinacy and time (e.g. a belief in a general determinism, and Determinacy following *a fortiori*). These wider claims are not the concern here.

[10]The point here is that for the Gradualist, at a time T, utterances *after* T should not count in determining the semantics of utterances at or before T. In other words, utterances which do not have a determinate speaker referent *because they have not occured yet* should not count as part of the practice. Some utterances might fail to have a determinate speaker referent even once they are made because the speaker is confused—this is a separate issue.

accept Graduality are not only committed to the referents of past utterances being *determined* retrospectively, but also to their *changing* retrospectively. This leads to various undesirable consequences—truth, knowledge status and moral valence can also change well after the fact in ways which seem unlikely. In 2.2 I show the practice theory and Determinacy jointly entail that most of the facts which determine our present utterances' semantics *as they are made* are far in the future, and thus epistemically inaccesible to present speakers. At best, this means that for all we know we are systematically mistaken in our present uses of some names (because the semantic future 'outweighs' the present), at worst that we should expect most of our utterances are mistaken.

Neither Sainsbury or deRosset mention this issue. Michaelson is explicit in making no commitment either way about *semantic* reference—he thinks (and I agree) that whatever we say about the determinacy of other properties of events (such as helping to precipitate a war) we should say about semantic reference too. Presumably he would say the same of the speaker reference which determines semantic reference.[11]

2.1 Graduality

If Graduality is true, then there will be cases where the reference of an utterance is determined (perhaps only after it is made), and is then determined *again*, differently, later. On practice theories with Graduality then, the reference of an utterance can change after it is made and has a determinate referent. On the multi-practice theory this doesn't happen—instead the utterance gains a new referent after gaining its initial one, though this has similarly strange consequences. I will explain exactly how this happens and describe the strange consequences. I conclude the practice theory with Graduality is untenable.

Consider the following case, illustrated with a diagram (p. 11). In the diagram, each column represents an utterance. The horizontal axis represents the time that utterance was made (the utterance of the first column was made at $T1$, the one in the second column at $T2$, etc.). The vertical axis represents the time at which the semantics of each utterance is being *evaluated*. Recall that for the practice theory with Graduality, after an utterance U is made, as time moves on, *more* (later) utterances can come to contribute to determining its semantics. So it is important that the time from which U's semantics are evaluated might differ from the time when U was made. In particular, if the time of evaluation is a long time *after* U was made, then many more utterances may have been added to the practice in the intervening time. So each cell in the diagram

[11] For what it's worth, Michaelson seems to lean towards Graduality. The phrasing of his discussion of multiple practices suggests that, on this proposal, facts like which practice will 'win' in the end are not always determined at the time an utterance is made. Michaelson also cites Ball (2020), who tacitly conflates (pp. 1058–9) the claim that an utterance's semantics might depend on events after the utterance with the claim that there is no fact of the matter about these semantics until the time of the later events; Ball tacitly assumes Graduality.

represents an utterance's semantics, as evaluated from a certain time. Each cell has two parts: the upper letter is the speaker referent, and the lower letter the semantic referent (if any—cells where this is unclear, or where theories differ, have been left blank). So for example, the utterance made at $T3$, when evaluated from T4, has speaker referent C and semantic referent C. In the last row, the semantic referents inside brackets are admitted only on the multi-practice theory; those outside brackets are admitted by all variants. My case is adapted from Sainsbury (2005, p. 114).

I have heard of an unusually steep local mountain called 'Ammag'. I am on the ridge in full view of two conspicuous mountains, C and D. A local points to C and tells me it is called 'Ammag'. By a trick of perspective, D looks steeper than C to me (though in fact C/Ammag, is steeper). I take him to have pointed to D, just above which hovers the only cloud in the sky. At $T1$ I say $U1$ 'There's a cloud above Ammag'. My utterance's speaker-referent is D. It isn't clear whether my utterance has a semantic referent at this point. For Sainsbury, because it isn't yet determinate whether my utterance counts as initiation into the practice. For Michaelson, because it isn't determinate whether my utterance serves 'as the first significant step towards the establishment of a practice of using a name N to refer to [D]'.

The local says 'No, that's not Ammag. Ammag's the other one (i.e. C)'. I realise my mistake and say at $T2$ 'ah, Ammag is the one with the forest' (which it is). Perhaps I also realise that the apparent steepness must have been an illusion. This time, I speaker-refer to C. It is not clear whether this utterance has a semantic referent either.

The conversation continues: 'Ah, and Ammag has a little house on it!' at $T3$. Again I speaker-refer to C. At this point, it is definitely the case that most of my uses speaker-refer to C. For Sainsbury, I have been successfully 'initiated' into the preexisting practice. At $T3$ it is not the case that my utterance $U1$ was 'the first significant step towards the establishment of a practice of using a name N to refer to [D]' so for Michaelson I have not established a new practice. Thus at $T3$, the semantic referent of my utterances $U1$-$U3$ is C. $U1$'s speaker-referent is D, so it is a mistake—this is exactly the kind of case practice theories are supposed to handle. $U2$ and $U3$ speaker-refer to C, so they are current utterances. At $T4$ I use the name similarly: 'There is no cloud over Ammag' (which there isn't).

The next day, I walk through a forest in the valley and emerge to see the mountains from a very different angle. Walking up the foothills, I mistakenly believe the ground to be very steep (maybe I'm not very fit) and thus at $T5$ say 'The ground is rising—I must be on Ammag'. My speaker-referent is D—clearly I mostly intend to refer to the object which causes the ground to rise as I walk (and mistakenly infer that the mountain is C).[12] The semantic referent is C though, because my utterance continues the previous

[12]This might not convince—I intend to refer to the mountain, but I also intend to continue the old practice and these intentions are incompatible. One might think that with mixed and incompatible intentions, there is no determinate speaker referent. Consider Sainsbury's *Ammag 2* case. (2005, p. 114) There, the semantic referent of the new practice I found is D, so it must be that the speaker-referent of

practice, and semantic reference is determined by membership of such practices. So I say something false (because I'm not on C/Ammag, I'm on D) but without knowing it. My utterance at $T6$ is similar: 'Ammag's right there', again speaker-referring to D, but with semantic referent C. At $T7$ I speaker-refer to D again, e.g. 'I'm nearly at the top of Ammag'. Again, my speaker referent is D. Again it is not clear what the semantic referent of my utterance is here.

I speaker-refer to D again at $T8$. At this point, it becomes the case that most of my utterances since (and including) my initial utterance speaker-refer to D, and that $U1$ served 'unintentionally, as the first significant step towards the establishment of a practice of using a name ['Ammag'] to refer to [D]'. This is sufficient to make it the case that $U1$ was an unintentional baptism: I have established a routine practice of using 'Ammag' to speaker-refer to D, so the semantic referent of each utterance in that practice is D. But $U2$ is such an utterance, so at $T8$ the semantic referent of my utterance $U2$ is D, when before (e.g. at $T3$) it was C. This discrepancy is represented in the diagram by the fact that the lower letter in column $T3$, row $T8$ is D (ignoring the brackets), but the lower letter in column $T3$, row $T3$ was C.

On the multi-practice account, $U2$ now has two semantic referents: C with respect to the first practice (this is the letter in brackets) and D with respect to the second. Because of the first referent, $U2$ retains its status as a correct utterance, and because of the second, it is now *also* an mistake. The same is true of $U1$: at $T3$, $U1$ was a mistake, at $T8$ it is an unintentional baptism (or according to the multi-practice account, by $T8$ it is both).

This example is deliberately crude. More utterances could be added between $T3$ and $T5$ to improve the establishment of the original practice, and/or between $T6$ and $T7$ to strengthen the case for the later utterances affecting the earlier ones. The circumstances of certain utterances could be changed to accommodate different notions of speaker reference (see also fn.12). Details of how my various utterances are picked up by friends could be added if the routine is not sufficiently social to satisfy Michaelson's account. I do not think any of these details will significantly affect the structure of the objection.

To be clear: the problem (for versions other than the multi-practice account) is *not* that the reference of a name can change over time (i.e. the difference in semantic referents between ($T8$,$T8$) and ($T3$,$T3$)) nor that the referent of an utterance can sometimes be determined after the utterance is made. The problem is that my earlier uses *do* semantically refer to C (once their reference is determinate), *until* the later uses

most utterances in that practice is D. But it is true of *all* utterances in that practice that I both intend to refer to D *and* intend to carry on the old hand's practice (again, unknown to me, these intentions are incompatible). But if the speaker-referents are mostly D, then the former intentions must be the ones determining speaker-reference (or at least be more important than the latter). For Sainsbury then, perception or object-related intentions determine speaker reference in such cases, so D is the speaker referent of my utterance at $T5$. Michaelson's comments about Dias' initial coordination on Madagascar also seem sympathetic to this view. (2023, p. 1441). This is the notion of speaker reference actually used by the practice theorists I cite, so I have adopted it here.

Time Utterance made

Time of Evaluation	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8
T1	D							
T2	D	C						
T3	D C	C C	C C					
T4	D C	C C	C C	C C				
T5	D C	C C	C C	C C	D C			
T6	D C	C C	C C	C C	D C	D C		
T7	D	C	C	C	D	D	D	
T8	D D(C)	C D(C)	C D(C)	C D(C)	D D(C)	D D(C)	D D(C)	D D(C)

(Upper letter represents speaker referent, lower letter semantic referent.)

occur, but the later uses bring it about that the earlier uses no longer refer to C (and instead refer to D). The later uses *change the past.* This is represented by the difference between ($T2$,$T3$), where the semantic referent of $U2$ is C, and ($T2$,$T8$), where it is D. This seems wrong to me: even accepting that the referent of an utterance might be determined after it is made, once the utterance *has* a referent, its status should not change.

On the multi-practice account with Graduality, $U2$ doesn't have one referent which *changes*; it gains one referent, then later gains another. This leads to some of the same consequences (see below) but also an additional problem. like $U2$, $U1$ will gain one referent (C, at $T3$) then later gain another (D, at $T8$). In virtue of the first it will be a mistake, and in virtue of the second an accidental baptism. But this compromises the whole theory's motivation: the practice theory was supposed to distinguish unintentional baptisms from mistakes. But at $T8$ in the type of case described, $U1$ is both an unintentional baptism *and* a mistake.

We see now why the above analogies fail. What determines that the Chesapeake-Leopard Affair helped to precipitate the War of 1812 is the *War of 1812*.[13] The War is *a single event.* Once this event has occurred, the question of whether the Affair helped to precipitate it is closed.

The practice theorist claims that this is similar to the question of whether an

[13]Or, depending on the details of the account, the fact/event/situation/state of affairs of the War's beginning/ending, or certain properties of these, or certain relations of these to the Chesapeake-Leopard Affair. See Gallow (2022, sec.1.1) for an overview of these options. These details do not affect my discussion.

utterance U leads to a practice of using a name in a certain way. But the practice theorists' commitments about practices do not allow this. A practice includes a whole series of utterances, each discrete events. The properties which ground U's semantic reference come to whether *enough* (generally *most*) of these utterances speaker-refer to a certain thing. So there is no *one* event after U whose properties fix any of U's properties—unlike the Chesapeake-Leopard Affair.[14]

On a Gradualist theory, the number of utterances relevant to determining the semantics of some certain utterance U can grow over time (as more utterances occur in U's practice, and have their speaker-referents determined). As the overall number of relevant utterances grows, the threshold for how many 'most' is will change, and thus so can whether most utterances after U have a certain speaker-referent, and whether U semantically refers to a certain object. There is no reason that U could not gain, lose, and re-gain a semantic property post-fact as it becomes true, then false, then true that some object is the most common speaker-referent in the practice. This is exactly what happens in the case described above. At $T4$, most of the utterances after $U1$ speaker-refer to C. But adding further utterances $U5 - U8$ increases the total number of utterances in the practice, and thus increases the threshold for *most* of them to speaker-refer similarly. By $T8$, the threshold and the distribution of utterances have both changed such that most of the utterances after $U1$ speaker-refer to D: $U1$ has lost its original referent and gained a new one.

A better analogy is with a property of events which is also determined by a series of other events, including later ones. Consider *being a typical result*, as a property of sports matches. In 2004, the Red Sox beat the Yankees for the first time in the modern lives of either team. On a Gradualist theory of the determination of sports results, it was true in 2003 that the 2002 Yankee win was typical of the rivalry. These days the Red Sox are arguably doing better than the Yankees. Supposing that this role reversal continues into the future, then in 2050 it will definitely be *false* that the result of 2002 is typical—the Sox are (in 2050) the far better team, so a Yankee win, even the win of 2002, will be *atypical*.

One might object that we would say in 2050 that the 2002 win was typical *for its time*, and is atypical *now* (in 2050), thus indexing typicality to a time. This does not seem particularly problematic for typicality. My objection is essentially that the gradualist practice theory is forced to make a similar indexing move regarding semantic reference (i.e. $U2$ refers to C at $T3$ but to D at $T8$), but that this *does* seem problematic: for the practice theorist, semantic reference is much more like the property of being a typical result than it is like helping to precipitate the War of 1812. Both can be determined by facts after the event in question. But the former property can be gained, lost and regained by an event as time moves on *after it*, the latter cannot.

[14]Silver (2022) has argued vigorously that there are cases of backward causation determining social facts. It is telling that the even he relies exclusively on 'closed question' cases, like Affair.

Intuitively such retrospective semantic shifts seem very unlikely to me. This alone might not seem strange enough for some. Consider though the wide array of *other* properties of an utterance, both semantic and non-semantic, which are determined or affected by its reference (or the reference of its parts). If the reference of an utterance can change retrospectively, then so can these properties. Such shifts would lead to bizarre consequences for the role of reference in our speech and lives.

The simplest example of retrospective change is truth. In the case of the two mountains above, at $T2$ I uttered $U2$ 'ah, Ammag is the one with the forest'. At $T2$, my utterance of 'Ammag' in $U2$ semantically referred to C (Ammag). C does have a forest, so my utterance was true. But by $T8$, it is the case that $U2$ referred to D. D doesn't have a forest, so at $T8$, it is the case that $U2$ is false—between $T2$ and $T8$ the truth of my utterance $U2$ has changed retrospectively.

This is unlike standard cases of change in truth value. In a standard case, I might utter 'I am France' while in France, and later utter the same sentence in England. There are *two* utterances of the same sentence: the first is true and the second is false. In the case of the two mountains though, there is *one* utterance, and its truth value is fixed when it is made (or shortly after it is made, when the reference of the utterance of 'Ammag' is fixed), then fixed *again*, differently, later on. This seems very strange. My utterance $U1$ is true, because a certain mountain has a forest on it (at the time of the utterance). Surely facts about my later utterances (or anyone else's), at a significant remove from that mountain and forest, should not affect whether it is true?

Truth is a particularly stark example, but anything which is effected by an utterance's reference will behave in a similar way. Suppose I believe at $T3$ that my utterance $U3$ semantically refers to C (after writing a paper like this, I am apt to go about thinking of such things). Suppose that this belief constitutes knowledge. At $T8$, $U3$ refers to D. So it is no longer the case (at $T8$) that I knew (at $T3$) what my utterance referred to—events between $T3$ and $T8$ have changed not only the semantic past, but the epistemic past as well.

Finally, suppose that referring to D was profane in the surrounding community, and therefore immoral (at least for those who know it is profane, and suppose that I do know). I make a speech about mountain tourism in the area, publicly referring to C. A month later, it comes about that my utterance referred to D. This fact is discovered and published by some local semanticists. By this time, it is the case that I referred to D, and so that I committed a profanity and should be reprimanded. Whether my utterance was morally permissible at the time it was made has changed *after that time*.

The multi-practice account also fares badly here, but in a different way. If $U2$ retains its original referent, then it should retain its original truth value, since nothing else has changed. But then it gains *another* referent. Prima facie then, the utterance has *two* truth values, each corresponding with the facts about the referent of a different practice. At best, this commits the multi-practice account to a view on which truth

value assignments are individuated as finely as name-using practices. This will have very strange consequences. All claims of truth or falsehood will have to be indexed to a practice. Multiple names will complicate matters further: suppose the statement $U2$ contained utterances of two different names, and that a case like I describe occurs for each, in parallel. There will *four* practices, two for each name, and thus four different determinations of truth. More complex cases should easily be constructed. Surely this does not happen though—utterances like this have a single truth value, fixed at or near the time of utterance. Again, past knowledge will be similar affected: with respect to one practice, it will be the case that I knew what my utterance referred to, and with respect to the other that I was mistaken.

None of these results is at all palatable. The practice theory with Graduality should be rejected.

2.2 Determinacy

So much for Graduality. The alternative, Determinacy, claims that the speaker-referents of all utterances are determinate at all times. So it is determinate at $T1$ (as $U1$ is made) whether $U1$ will lead to a practice of using the relevant name in a certain way or not, and thus $U1$'s reference is determinate (along with its truth value, moral valence, etc.). Since the *whole* future is determinate, the 'arrival' of this future in the present will not affect the determinacy of $U1$'s reference; the practice theory with Determinacy does not countenance retrospective reference change or addition.

Thus Determinacy avoids the problems of Graduality. But this comes with its own epistemic problems: if the determinist practice theorist is right, there are cases of sudden semantic 'switching' part-way through a series of utterances which are otherwise indistinguishable for a speaker—the earlier utterances are systematically correct but the later ones systematically mistaken. I argue that the later utterances in these cases should not be counted as mistakes. Moreover, since speakers cannot in general predict these switches and the series may be very long, if they *are* mistakes then it is reasonable to suppose that *many* of our present uses of names are systematically in error, and that there is no way of correcting this error.

Consider the following case. I coin a name N for a person I see regularly but don't know well, say the security guard who is usually at the entrance to my university in the morning (let this guard be F) I use the name 20 times with my friends, occasionally as we walk past the door, or immediately afterwards. On all 20 occasions the guard is there, and my utterances semantically refer to them (because all these utterances are part of a practice associating 'N' with F). On the 21st occasion, the usual guard is off sick and has been replaced by a similar-looking colleague (G), to whom my utterance $U21$ speaker-refers. This guard is more observant than the first, and notices my use of N, though they say nothing. The original guard is back the next day, but only for a

week, after which they are off sick for good. On each day I use the name once, and my utterances $U22$-$U26$ speaker-refer to F. After leaving, F is permanently replaced by the second guard G. They see me on the day I walk in and say 'oh, you're that guy that calls me 'N'—did you have me mixed up with someone else?'. We both realise what has happened, but the guard says they like the name (and are much more friendly than the initial guard) so I go on using it for them well into the future.

Thus, my utterance $U21$ served 'unintentionally, as the first significant step towards the establishment of a practice of using a name N to refer to [G], [so] that utterance counts as an unintentional baptism of [G] as N'. (Michaelson 2023) Similarly for deRosset it 'stands at the beginning of a certain social practice … of using [N] to refer to [G]'. For Sainsbury 'if some object *d* is systematically and customarily the speaker referent of my uses of a name after a certain time, and before that time some distinct object *c* was the semantic referent of my uses of that name, the uses need to count as belonging to different practices [and thus have different semantic referents]'—again the operative time will be $T21$.

This case is illustrated in the following diagram: once again the upper letter at each time is the speaker referent, and the lower letter the semantic referent. Accepting Determinacy means facts are the same at all times.

	T1	…	T20	T21	T22	…	T26	T27	…
All Times	F	F	F	G	F	F	F	G	G
	F	F	F	G	G	G	G	G	G

As with the Ammag story, this case could be altered in various ways: more utterances could be made, the relation between the unintentional baptism and the later utterances could be tweaked to fulfil various criteria, etc. Again, I do not think such alterations will alter the structure of the objection.

This case is problematic in at least three ways. First, prima facie these utterances should not be treated as mistakes. I am correct about the semantic reference of nearly all my early utterances, have good reasons to believe what I do and neither my behaviour nor my environment change in a way I can detect, *yet* I suddenly start being wrong about the semantics of my later utterances of the same name, made under very similar circumstances (for $U21$–$U26$ these circumstances are subjectively indistinguishable; for $U22$–$U26$ they are in fact the same). This seems unlikely.

Indeed, this problem is almost exactly the same as one which originally inspired the practice theory. The simple causal theoretic solution to Evans' switching case was to pick one utterance between the early and the contemporary utterances, say that it was a baptism, and that all the later utterances referred to the baptised object. The problem was that if this occurred but the speakers went on as before (i.e. speaking referring to the original object, not the new one) they would be systematically in error—a good theory should treat this 'baptism' as a mistake.

I criticise the practice theory with Determinacy along similar lines. In my case there is an initial group of utterances all speaker-referring to one thing, then an utterance speaker-referring to something else (the baptism), then an 'intermediate' series of utterances speaker-referring to the initial thing (as in the problematic case for the simple solution) and finally a very long series of utterances speaker-referring to the second object (unique to my case). The problem is that this final series of utterances 'outweighs' the intermediate series even though at the time they are made, the intermediate utterances are all in accord with a pattern of (previous) behaviour and reference setup by the initial series.

Second, supposing that the utterances $U22$–$U26$ *are* mistakes, then the difference between the initial successful cases $U1$–$U20$ and the intermediate series of mistakes $U22$–$U26$ is entirely inaccessible for the speaker. The final run of utterances speaker-referring to G are in the future of the speaker when they make utterances $U22$–$U26$ (and in a different case, could be much further in the future) so there is no way for them to detect their mistakes. The concern here is not that speakers might make mistakes without knowing it—clearly any theory should allow for that—rather it is that speakers can go from being systematically correct ($U1$–$U20$) to systematically mistaken ($U22$–$U26$) and have *no way* of knowing it—the actual person I encounter everyday during the systematic mistakes is the same as the one I encounter everyday during the systematic successes. Such inaccessible failure seems unlikely too.

These lead to the third and most significant worry. The above case is rather artificial, but entirely believable, and could be made more natural with appropriate details. The case just requires that the name is in relatively common use, and is initially applied to one thing, followed by a single mistake (unknown to the user), an intermediary period of application consistent with the initial use, and a final period of application consistent with the mistake which is *caused by that mistake* (this causal relation between the mistake and the later uses is what makes utterances like $U21$ unintentional baptisms—otherwise it is tempting to say there are just two different practices, the first of which includes a single mistake). The initial, intermediate and final series of utterances could all be much longer or shorter than in the case above.

Since there is no way for the speaker to tell if they are in the intermediary period and that period could be of any length, for all any normal speaker knows, any of their utterances might be such systematic mistakes. The more widely used a name is the more likely such cases are to arise. Thus, for all we know, many of our everyday uses of names could be part of a long but ultimately insignificant chain of similar mistakes in the use of a name—a semantic history of any finite length can always be outweighed by a significantly longer semantic future in which the name is used differently (again, provided that there is at least one use of this kind before the utterance in question).

This will be true of any name which does not have a very tightly controlled pattern of use and is not certain to fall out of use in the near future: most names of any

interest. Moreover, since the actual semantic future of many names (e.g. 'London', 'Ludwig Wittgenstein') will likely be *enormously* longer than the semantic past, this consideration affects any such name currently in use: for any such name, it is reasonable to assume that our current uses may be systematically mistaken. Of course, there will probably be many names of which this is not true—there is just no way of presently distinguishing these from the rest.

At best, this entails a general scepticism about the semantic reference of our contemporary utterances, at worst a general positive assumption that our semantic beliefs are false. Neither is a happy picture—the practice theory with Determinacy should be rejected too.

The multi-practice theory with Determinacy fares only slightly better. It will analyse the above case like this:

	T1	...	T20	T21	T22	...	T26	T27	...
All Times	F	F	F	G	F	F	F	G	G
	F	F	F	G(F)	G(F)	G(F)	G(F)	G(?)	G(?)

(The utterances $U27$ onwards are notated with a question mark as whether they are part of the F-referring practice will depend on the exact details of the multi-practice theory, which are not worked out by Michaelson. This won't affect my comments.)

The multi-practice theory avoids the first of the three worries above. $U22$–$U26$ semantically refer to F (as well as G), so relative to at least one practice they are not mistakes.

But by the same token the other two problems remain, since the utterances also semantically refer to G, and relative to that practice they *are* mistakes. Rather than unknowingly going from making utterances which are only correct to utterances which are only mistakes (as in the above concern), on this theory a speaker will go from making utterances which are only correct to utterances which are both correct and mistakes (with respect to different practices). Again, this switch is entirely unknowable to the speaker and the broader application of this to all utterances is exactly as in the third concern above.

On top of this, appealing to Determinacy does not resolve the earlier concerns for the multi-practice account. It still fails to properly distinguish mistakes from accidental baptisms, and is still committed to utterances' truth values (and perhaps other properties) being individuated as finely as practices. Utterances in multiple practices like $U22$ might thus be true and false. Appealing to Determinacy also does not improve on the complications of introducing further names.

The baseball analogy sheds light on the Determinist practice theory too. Supposing that the current Sox-dominance persists for the rest of the lives of either team and that Determinacy holds, then it is true (and has always been true) that the 2002 Yankee win is/was atypical of the rivalry (or equivalently, false that the 2002 win was typical). As

the practice theorists claim, this *is* true in virtue of facts about what happens after the 2002 match. Again, these facts are not grounded in any *one* event, but in a long series of events, stretching into the future (possibly a very long way in the future).

But notice that in order to make the claim of typicality, one must specify that the current Sox-dominance *does* hold into the future. Nobody currently knows whether this is true. The major *difference* between semantic reference (on the Determinist practice theory) and the typicality of baseball results is that the future-dependence of typicality is widely known, so people don't generally hold beliefs or make claims about it, at least until well after the fact. If they did, they would only be able to make judgements based on the facts *so far*, and would thus often be systematically in error. If the Determinist practice theory is correct, knowledge of the semantic reference of utterances is exactly like this.

This is not a palatable picture: I claim that such cases of systematic error do not occur (or at least are not as widespread as the theory would predict), and thus that the Determinist practice theory is wrong. Conversely, if the theory is right, it seems to recommend we abandon our beliefs and claims about the semantics of our utterances, just as baseball fans do not make premature claims about the typicality of results. The practice theory with Determinacy should be rejected too.

3 What role for reference?

I have presented a problem for the practice theory: if the theory is right, then there are certain kinds of semantic case, with practical and epistemic consequences for our use of referring terms which—it seems to me—do not in fact obtain (different cases and different consequences depending on one's view of the future, though the dialectic is the same in both cases). It seems this way to me because there would be various strange epistemological and practical shortcomings and indeterminacies, as described above.

But the practice theorist might be comfortable with this. They might respond that I have entirely missed the point—on the practice theory, our communal ability to speaker-refer to objects ('coordinate thought and talk' on objects, etc.) *precedes* semantic reference, both philosophically and sometimes temporally. The cases I worry about *will* occur, but will not be worrying because our everyday activities will proceed anyway, on the basis of our prior capacity to speaker-refer. Practice theorists could even gesture at the case I discuss in 2.2 as a demonstration that we do often get on just fine even if semantic reference doesn't align with our expectations.

If so, it is not clear what role is left for semantic reference, or why philosophers might be interested in giving any such accounts. On one hand, clearly it plays no role in the ordinary use of language. On the practice theory, the successful use of referring linguistic devices to coordinate our actions *precedes* (perhaps even *constitutes*) semantic

reference. All the everyday kinds of things we might expect semantic reference to explain are instead explained by this prior capacity: if I try to make plans with a friend to visit the new Italian place in town, it is largely irrelevant whether either of us ever semantically refers to it, so long as we both end up at the same place. We might even have both been mistakenly semantically referring to some other place all along. It is precisely cases like this that the practice theorist takes to support their theory: everyone agrees that Marco Polo and his crewmates got something *wrong* in the story of how Madagascar got its name, but it is the fact that they *got on anyway* and thus established a new practice, that the practice theorist says grounds the later semantic reference to Madagascar with 'Madagascar'. On the practice theory, semantic reference follows *after* ordinary use of referring terms (often quite a while after); it cannot play any role in ordinary language because there is nothing for it to do.

On the other hand, it cannot play any role in philosophy. Work on reference in (meta)semantics generally proceeds by considering cases of widely-used names, with clear semantic referents, and building theories to accommodate these. Evans' own discussion of 'Madagascar' is a good example: the case works because all readers will agree that the earlier utterances referred to some area of the mainland, the later utterances to the island, and that the two are related in some way. Other work in the same field, including that discussed here also proceeds in this way (e.g. Kripke 1980; Sainsbury 2005; deRosset 2020; Michaelson 2023). This requires that the referents of these utterances (or inscriptions, if the practice theory can be extended to written language) are fixed, that the philosophers are in a position to know what they are, and often that they *do* know what they are.

But on the practice theory, these requirements will often not be fulfilled. Like 'Madagascar', most names currently discussed in philosophy of language are still widely used outside of philosophy—the names of famous philosophers, world leaders, heavenly bodies, etc. On the practice theory, uses of these names—even uses in philosophy—will thus have their reference fixed by their associated practices of use. So they too will be affected by the problems described above.

The problem for Gradualist theories is that the referents of past utterances/inscriptions are *not* necessarily fixed, so a philosopher's beliefs about them might easily go out of date as above. One could write a paper making true claims about the semantics of various utterances and inscriptions, then publish it, only to have the published claims retrospectively made false by uses in other papers published in response. The situation will only be worsened by the strange, often rather experimental, patterns of use philosophers of language engage in, which will make cases like the one I describe above much more common. On the practice theory with Graduality, semantic reference cannot play any role in philosophy because it is not stable enough to facilitate the uses it is supposed to be put to.

The problem for Determinist theories is that the semantics of present or past

utterances might be entirely different from what one would reasonably expect given all the available data. This is a different problem but the practical consequences will be similar to those for the Gradualist theorist. Philosophical talk and writing about language may proceed in a largely systematic and predictable way, but the philosopher's utterances may be false, though this is unknown (and unknowable) to the speaker or writer.

But if the practice theory delivers the result that semantic reference has no part in ordinary language or philosophy, why posit the theory in the first place?

This can be taken as a positive minimal adequacy constraint on theories of reference for utterances of names: no theory should be such that if it is true, it describes a phenomenon which plays no substantive role in our social lives.[15] But if the practice theory is true, and is interpreted as suggested in this section, then it is self-defeating in this way.

This can be expanded into a more substantive adequacy constraint by examining why the practice theory fails. I agree with the practice theorist (as most will) that an utterance with differing speaker referent and semantic referent is a mistake. Mistaking is a normative notion. So semantic reference normatively constrains our behaviour, with a norm roughly like *make name-utterances with matching speaker referent and semantic referent.*

The problem for the practice theory is that it entails cases where this norm cannot be followed consistently: for Graduality because the semantic referent might change after the speaker has spoken; for Determinacy because it might be epistemically inaccessible as they speak. I claimed this doesn't happen—if it did there would be unhappy consequences for other normatively important parts of our lives like truth, knowledge and reprimand.

The response that I have missed the point amounts to a claim that these consequences are not unhappy after all (though they will occur), because the relevant norm is not *make name-utterances with matching speaker referent and semantic referent* but something like *make name–utterances which will advance your goals.* But this comes at the cost of denying the role of semantic reference in our lives, since this norm is not concerned with semantic reference.

But semantic *does* play an important role in our lives. So a more substantive adequacy constraint on theories of reference for utterances of names is that they must retain or at least be compatible with something like the former norm: *make name-utterances with matching speaker referent and semantic referent.*

[15]Unless it is an error theory, where the substantive and intended claim is that there is no such phenomenon. But I take it that the practice theory is not an error theory.

4 Two responses

Finally, let us consider two reasonable lines of response a practice theorist might make.

4.1 Assessment sensitivity

I said above that on the Gradualist theory, later uses 'change the semantic past'. Some philosophers who have investigated the relationship between time and meaning would put this differently. MacFarlane (2003) presents a theory of the truth-values of future contingent utterances, on which the semantics of a sentence are relative to both the time it is uttered, and the (later) time it is evaluated. Saying 'there will be a sea battle tomorrow' my utterance is without truth value when assessed today, but true or false when assessed two days later. MacFarlane doesn't think the sea-battle's occurrence *changes* anything about the semantic properties of the original utterance, rather that it *has different properties* when assessed from different times.[16]

A Gradualist theorist might thus respond that the 'retrospective semantic shift' I describe should be understood just as sensitivity to a context of assessment and that such assessment-sensitivity is not particularly worrisome after all—many people assess future contingents in this way.

Redescribing my objection in terms of assessment-sensitivity is clearly unobjectionable. I write in these terms above as well. It is the second claim that bears the load of the response.

MacFarlane gives two reasons for thinking the truth-values of utterances of future-contingents are in fact assessment-sensitive. First, this resolves our otherwise conflicting intuitions about the truth values of utterances, and second, this is 'what people unschooled in philosophy naturally will say' (p. 327).

But neither reason applies to the reference of utterances of names (they might apply to the claim that baptismal-status is assessment-sensitive, but this is not the claim I object to). People do not say things like 'now some time has passed since you said 'Madagascar', it turns out you did not really mean what you meant at the time'[17] whereas the commonality of claims like this about future contingents and truth is what motivates MacFarlane in the first place (e.g. 'your prediction of a sea-battle was true after all'). Neither are there mixed intuitions about the reference of utterances: speakers of future contingents *intend* to say something which is impacted by the facts of the future. If the future is open,[18] then it is intuitively appealing that the utterance's semantics must await a determination of those facts. But utterers of names rarely

[16] Or perhaps has the same properties, which produce different results when assessed from different times. Either way, nothing about the original utterance *changes* after the fact.

[17] People *do* say things like 'When you said 'Madagascar', it turned out not to mean what you/we thought it meant', but the 'turning out' here is epistemic—the claim is that *all along* the utterance of 'Madagascar' meant one certain thing, but the speaker and hearer have only just realised this.

[18] Or if semantics should *treat* the future as open, as MacFarlane more cautiously claims.

do this—in uttering 'Madagascar' Marco Polo wished to refer to something *there and then*, and would probably not care about the semantic status of his utterance when evaluated later.[19] So: although it is possible to describe my case in the language of assessment-sensitivity, the case so-described is still objectionable, because there are not good reasons to think utterances of names are in fact assessment-sensitive.

4.2 Temporal externalism and bringing about the past

Aside from the theories discussed above, there is a broader philosophical tradition claiming that events at some later time can affect the semantics of some earlier time. Under the heading *Temporal Externalism*, Jackman (1999, 2005, 2020) has argued extensively that later patterns of use of a term can affect the meaning of earlier uses. Tanesini (2006) argues similarly that normative facts (including semantic facts) about an earlier time can be fixed by later events (see also Tanesini 2014).

Someone sympathetic to Temporal Externalism might point out that its conclusions are widely respected—even if not widely accepted—and that the practice theory is just an extension of this sort of thing to singular terms. deRosset and Michaelson both cite Jackman's work in support of rejecting a principle like Retrospection.

The most significant problem with this claim is that work which has actually gone by the name 'Temporal Externalism' is importantly distinct from the practice theories discussed above. All central works of Temporal Externalism are concerned entirely with what fixes the extensions of (utterances of) general terms, whereas practice theories are concerned with what fixes the referents of utterances of proper names.[20] Because an extension is a set of many different items (united by falling under one term/concept), it can change *slightly*, as some objects are added or removed. Temporal Externalist cases generally hinge on how future events can fix whether a certain entity falls in the extension of a kind term in *the present*. But this is not the case with singular referents: a name either refers to a certain mountain or it does not.

Moreover, Temporal Externalists are clear that only relatively minor affects may occur this way. Tanesini (2006, fn.10) carefully brackets from her view words which 'have undergone dramatic changes in their meanings'. Jackman (1999, p. 160) is explicit that his conclusions are limited to 'accessible' changes in meaning—those which preserve 'a sufficient number of entrenched beliefs and applications, and [have] no competitor that preserves significantly more'. This is borne out by Jackman's examples, all of which involve the meaning of a general term becoming more specific, or changing to cover previously unencountered cases. But it is difficult to imagine a *more* dramatic

[19] Of course, this claim will not apply to the referents of names like 'Newman1', (Kaplan 1968, p.201) 'Zeke', (Jeshion 2000, p.300) or 'Henry Grace à Dieu' (Hawthorne and Manley 2012, p.27–8), which are fixed by future-looking descriptions. These are unusual though, and the main concerns of this paper still apply even if (just) these names really should be treated assessment-sensitively.

[20] Michaelson (2023, fn.5) distances himself from the label 'Temporal Externalism' for exactly this reason.

change in meaning than a shift of reference from one object to an entirely distinct object (as in the Ammag case above), and such shifts will certainly *not* preserve the most 'entrenched beliefs and applications'. So actual Temporal Externalist theories are inapt for dealing with my cases on two cases on two counts: first that Temporal Externalism is chiefly concerned with the meanings of general terms, not names, and second that the Temporal Externalist view is only taken to be plausible for cases of minor or 'accessible' retrospective shift in these terms' extensions, which surely does not include shifts from one referent to an entirely separate one. So the problem I raise puts the practice theory outside the bounds of Temporal Externalism.

Of course, one might recognise these trends in the literature but still insist that Temporal Externalism really includes any theory which rejects Retrospection. Practice theories would then be a particular kind of Temporal Externalism applied to names. Indeed, Haukioja (2020) does consider a version of Temporal Externalism for proper names. Those like Haukioja, who take it this way, may read this paper as an argument that Temporal Externalist fails for proper names.

This interpretation is no more promising though, for the extant literature on Temporal Externalism is no better equipped to respond to my concerns than the practice theorists are. It is concerned to reject principles like Retrospection, but there is little discussion of when the future facts will be determinate (i.e. of Graduality or Determinacy), or the consequences of this for the theory. Ball (2020), who Michaelson cites, does not even recognise the distinction. On one hand he says 'The temporal externalist holds that properties like meaning that water is wet and believing that arthritis is a disease are Solonic' (1059), where 'a property p is Solonic if and only if whether an object has p at a time t depends in part on what happens after t' (1058); a Solonic property is one for which an equivalent of Retrospection is false. But Ball also says that happiness would be Solonic if there was 'no fact of the matter as to whether a man is leading a happy life until after he is dead' (1058). This characterisation requires both rejecting an equivalent of Retrospection *and* assuming an equivalent of Graduality. Ball does not seem to recognise this distinction, and other elements of the Temporal Externalist literature simply do not mention this issue.

Finally, the extant Temporal Externalist literature only considers cases where what is determined by future facts is undetermined by anything before those future facts. Jackman (1999) considers the use of a term 'ave' for flying birds, by a group who have never observed flightless birds. Once the group encounter flightless birds, these are included in the appropriate application of 'ave'. Jackman thus urges that previous uses (before the encounter) will have a meaning which includes flightless birds. Haukioja's case with the proper name 'Grant's land' has a similar structure. Only two groups of uses are considered (those before the encounter and those after), and the facts obtaining at or before the earlier uses do not fully determine their meaning to cover the case at hand. This reflects the standard switching cases the practice theory is designed to

accommodate (like 'Madagascar'), but it is unlike the cases I describe. In my cases, there are at least three groups of uses (earlier, middle and later)—the facts obtaining at or before the earlier uses are not sufficient to determine their reference, but the facts at or before the middle *or* later uses *are*. Thus the problem I consider puts the practice theory beyond this constraint. (Rouse 2014, does mention this issue but only very briefly (p. 27))

Appeals to work along the lines of Temporal Externalism thus do not rescue the practice theory.

5 Conclusion

I have argued that practice theories of reference fail. I distinguished two kinds of practice theory, and introduced a hard case, which produces surprising results for either. I take the case itself to show that the theories are intuitively implausible, but I also offer several practical concerns for the consequences of such cases. Thus I conclude, the practice theory fails.

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