

# WHY AND HOW TO FILL AN UNFILLED PROPOSITION

by

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## ABSTRACT

There are two major semantic theories of proper names: Semantic Descriptivism and Direct Reference. According to Semantic Descriptivism, the semantic content of a proper name N for a speaker S is identical to the semantic content of a definite description “the F” that the speaker associates with the name. According to Direct Reference, the semantic content of a proper name is identical to its referent. Semantic Descriptivism suffers from a number of drawbacks first pointed out by Donnellan (1970) and Kripke (1972). Direct Reference faces difficulties of its own, most importantly the problem of empty names. The most promising Directly Referential solution to this problem is the Unfilled Proposition view, according to which utterances of sentences containing empty names semantically express unfilled propositions. But this view faces the problem of accounting for the intuition that negative existentials involving empty names are true. The most promising way of dealing with this problem within Unfilled Proposition theory is to suppose (i) that utterances of sentences may be used to pragmatically convey propositions they do not semantically express, and (ii) that the proposition pragmatically conveyed by a speaker S’s utterance of a sentence containing an empty name N (where “the F” is a definite description S associates with N) is identical to the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of the sentence obtained by replacing N with “the

F”. Call this view “Pragmatic Descriptivism”. With respect to the problem of negative existentials, Pragmatic Descriptivists can insist that, although an utterance of “Santa does not exist” is literally neither true nor false, our taking it to be true may be explained as the result of our having confused the unfilled proposition it semantically expresses with the clearly true descriptive proposition it pragmatically conveys. Despite its theoretical virtues, Pragmatic Descriptivism has recently come under fire. Everett (2003), in particular, has advanced four different lines of criticism, to which Adams and Dietrich (2004) have responded in some detail. In this paper, I have two main aims. The first is to argue that Adams and Dietrich’s replies to Everett’s criticisms (with one exception) are ineffective. I conclude that there is no acceptable strategy for solving the problem of empty names within Direct Reference theory. The second is to argue that there is a promising alternative to Semantic Descriptivism and Direct Reference that requires us to fill unfilled propositions with names, thereby solving the problem of empty names.

There are two major semantic theories of proper names: Semantic Descriptivism and Direct Reference. According to Semantic Descriptivism, the semantic content of a proper name N for a speaker S is identical to the semantic content of a definite description “the F” that the speaker associates with the name. According to Direct Reference, the semantic content of a proper name is identical to its referent. As is well known, Semantic Descriptivism suffers from a number of drawbacks first pointed out by Donnellan (1970) and Kripke (1972).<sup>1</sup> The first difficulty is semantic: in many cases, the definite description that S associates with N (if it denotes) denotes an entity other than the

referent of N. The second difficulty is epistemic: in many cases, contrary to what Semantic Descriptivism predicts, an utterance of “If N exists, then N=the F” does not semantically express a proposition that is knowable *a priori*. And the third difficulty is modal: although Semantic Descriptivism entails that the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of “If N exists, then N=the F” is *metaphysically necessary*, in many cases the relevant proposition is *metaphysically contingent*.

Direct Reference faces three main difficulties of its own. First, there is the problem of cognitive significance (or, as it has come to be known, Frege’s Puzzle): if the content of a proper name is its referent, then different proper names have the same content, and hence utterances of “N=M” and “N=N” semantically express the same proposition; yet these two utterances differ in cognitive significance, and it would seem that utterances semantically expressing the same proposition should not differ in cognitive significance. Second, there is the problem of substitution: if the content of a proper name is its referent, then co-referential proper names should be intersubstitutable in propositional attitude contexts *salva veritate*; yet linguistic intuitions suggest that substitution of co-referential proper names in such contexts often fails to preserve truth-value. In recent years, Direct Reference theorists have made some headway in replying to these objections.<sup>2</sup> But they have struggled to find an appropriate response to the third difficulty: the problem of empty names.

An empty name is a name that has no referent. Examples of such names abound. One prominent example is the case of Leverrier, who in 1859 thought he had discovered a planet responsible for the perturbations in the orbit of Mercury, a planet he named “Vulcan”. As astronomers later realized, there is no such planet, and hence the name

“Vulcan” does not refer. As Braun (1993; 2005) points out, the existence of empty names poses a number of challenges to Direct Reference. The two most basic challenges derive from the fact that Direct Reference entails that empty names have no semantic content. First, it would seem that expressions that have no semantic content are meaningless, and hence that Direct Reference entails the counterintuitive result that empty names, as well as all sentences containing them, are meaningless or nonsensical. (Following Braun (1993, 451-452), call this “The Problem of Nonsense.”) Second, since meaningless sentences have no truth-value, it would seem that Direct Reference is committed to the counterintuitive claim that an utterance of a sentence such as “Vulcan does not exist,” an utterance that seems clearly true, is neither true nor false. (Following Braun (1993, 452), call this “The Problem of Truth.”)

Direct Reference theorists have proposed two main strategies for dealing with the problem of empty names. Following Braun (1993, 456 ff. and 460 ff.), let us call the first “The No Proposition View” and the second “The Unfilled Proposition View.”

According to the No Proposition View, an utterance of a sentence containing an empty name fails to express a proposition. In partial defense of the No Proposition View, Braun (1993, 459) tries to explain away the Problem of Nonsense by hypothesizing that utterances of sentences containing empty names express beliefs (non-abstract, enduring, event-like entities that occur in minds/brains) that are causally related to speech acts that can themselves cause beliefs in auditors who may then be said to “understand” what they have been told. The reason that these sorts of utterances are not “nonsense,” despite the fact that they do not express propositions, is that, unlike paradigmatic pieces of nonsense (such as “all mimsy were the borogoves”), they are systematically related to the

production of beliefs in speakers and hearers. The problem with this explanation is that it is inconsistent with the platitude<sup>3</sup> that when a hearer understands what a speaker says, *what* she understands is the proposition the relevant utterance expresses.

Braun (1993, 459-460) himself recognizes that the No Proposition View has no ready answer to the Problem of Truth. Braun's best attempt at such an answer, "The True Sentence View," rests on the hypothesis that an utterance of a sentence containing an empty name can be true even when it fails to express a proposition.<sup>4</sup> But this hypothesis contradicts yet another platitude<sup>5</sup>, this one to the effect that an utterance of a sentence is true if and only if what it says (i.e., the proposition it expresses) is the case.

According to the Unfilled Proposition View, an utterance of a sentence containing an empty name N semantically expresses an "unfilled" or "gappy" proposition, that is, a proposition that has an empty place (or "gap") where the referent of N would go if N had a referent. The thought here is that propositions are complex entities that are structurally isomorphic to the sentences used to semantically express them, and whose constituents are the worldly referents of the relevant sentential components. On this view, whereas an utterance of "Mercury is small" semantically expresses the proposition

<Mercury, being small>,

an utterance of "Vulcan is small" semantically expresses the proposition

<           , being small>.

The Unfilled Proposition View easily handles the Problem of Nonsense. For, on this view, utterances of sentences containing empty names express *bona fide* propositions (even if "gappy" ones). But Unfilled Proposition theorists continue to struggle with the

Problem of Truth (and related difficulties). Braun (1993, 463) proposes a principle according to which atomic gappy propositions are false. But, as Everett (2003, 9) points out, this result conflicts with our considered intuitions that an utterance of “Santa is identical to Santa,” though perhaps not true, is surely not false.<sup>6</sup> Salmon (1998, 309) claims that negative existentials containing genuinely empty names (such as “Nappy does not exist,” where “Nappy” is a name introduced to refer to the new emperor of France) are ambiguous, and that on one reading such existentials lack truth-value altogether. However, as Everett (2003, 14) points out, “we seem under no temptation whatsoever to count [an utterance of “Nappy does not exist”] as anything other than true.”

The most popular strategy for dealing with the Problem of Truth within Direct Reference theory results from combining the Unfilled Proposition View with two theses.<sup>7</sup>

The first thesis, already familiar from the work of Grice (1989), is that it is possible for utterances of sentences to pragmatically convey propositions they do not semantically express. For example, an ordinary utterance of “Fred went to bed and took off his trousers” does not semantically express, but rather pragmatically imparts or conveys, the proposition that Fred took off his trousers *after* he went to bed.

The second thesis, which builds on the second, is that the proposition pragmatically conveyed by a speaker S’s utterance of a sentence containing an empty name N (where “the F” is the—let us suppose, unique—definite description S associates with N) is identical to the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of the sentence obtained by replacing N with “the F”. On this view, when Leverrier uttered “Vulcan is small”, he semantically expressed a gappy proposition but pragmatically

conveyed the proposition expressed by an utterance of “The planet responsible for the perturbations in the orbit of Mercury is small.”

These theses, together with the Unfilled Proposition View, define a position one might call “Pragmatic Descriptivism”. The basic idea is to blend Direct Reference with the insights of Pragmatics and Descriptivism. By adopting a Directly Referential semantics, but a Descriptivist pragmatics, of proper names, the Pragmatic Descriptivist’s hope is to avoid the disadvantages of Semantic Descriptivism and classical Direct Reference theory. In particular, Pragmatic Descriptivists claim that they can handle the Problem of Nonsense and the Problem of Truth posed by the existence of empty names. With respect to the Problem of Nonsense, Pragmatic Descriptivists insist that, although empty names have no semantic content, utterances of sentences containing such names express legitimate semantic structures (i.e., gappy propositions). And with respect to the Problem of Truth, Pragmatic Descriptivists can insist that, although an utterance of “Vulcan does not exist” is literally neither true nor false, our *taking it to be true* may be explained as the result of our having confused the gappy proposition it semantically expresses with the clearly true descriptive proposition (to the effect that there is no planet responsible for the perturbations in the orbit of Mercury) it pragmatically conveys.

Despite its theoretical virtues, Pragmatic Descriptivism has recently come under fire. Everett (2003), in particular, has advanced four different lines of criticism, to which Adams and Dietrich (2004) have responded in some detail. In this paper, I have two main aims. The first is to argue that all but one of Adams and Dietrich’s replies to Everett’s criticisms are ineffective. If I am right, we can understand not only *that*, but also exactly *how*, Pragmatic Descriptivism goes wrong. I conclude that there is no

acceptable strategy for solving the problem of empty names within Direct Reference theory. The second is to argue that there is an alternative to Semantic Descriptivism and Direct Reference that solves the problem of empty names.

The paper divides into three parts. In section 1, I canvas Everett's criticisms of Pragmatic Descriptivism. In section 2, I consider and then criticize Adams and Dietrich's reply to Everett. In section 3, I outline a new semantic theory of names (call it the "Lexical Theory") that is immune to the problems that bedevil Semantic Descriptivism and Direct Reference (including the problem of empty names).

### 1. Everett's Criticisms of Pragmatic Descriptivism

Everett (2003) mounts four objections to Pragmatic Descriptivism: (A) the Modal Profiles Problem, (B) the Filled Names Problem, (C) the Different Descriptions Problem, and (D) the No Descriptions Problem. Let us consider each of these criticisms in turn.

#### *A. The Modal Profiles Problem*

Suppose that a speaker S associates with name N a unique definite description, "the F". According to Pragmatic Descriptivism, when S utters "N is identical to M" (where N is an empty name and M is a filled name) S's utterance semantically expresses a gappy proposition but pragmatically conveys the proposition that M is the F. But S's utterance is necessarily false, while the proposition that M is the F is possibly true. For example, our intuitions tell us both that an utterance of "Santa is identical with John Perry" is

necessarily false and that it is possibly true that John Perry is the jolly plump person who brings presents to everyone at Christmas (Everett 2003, 16).

As Everett argues, the Pragmatic Descriptivist will have difficulty accounting for our modal intuitions in this sort of case. On the one hand, we do not come by our intuition that the utterance says something that is necessarily false by keying on the proposition allegedly semantically expressed, for this proposition is gappy and hence, according to the Pragmatic Descriptivist, truth-valueless. And, on the other hand, we do not come by the same intuition by confusing the proposition allegedly pragmatically conveyed with the proposition allegedly semantically expressed, for the proposition allegedly pragmatically conveyed is possibly true. Yet these two options appear to exhaust the reasonable explanatory strategies (Everett 2003, 16-21).

### *B. The Filled Names Problem*

According to Pragmatic Descriptivism, utterances of sentences containing *empty* names pragmatically convey descriptive propositions. Given that it is unreasonable to suppose that the operation of pragmatic mechanisms depends on whether names are empty or filled (or on whether speaker or audience takes names to be empty or filled), the Pragmatic Descriptivist must accept that utterances of sentences containing *filled* names pragmatically convey descriptive propositions too. However, Pragmatic Descriptivists also explain our intuitions about the truth-value of utterances of sentences containing empty names by supposing that we tend to confuse the propositions pragmatically conveyed by these utterances with the propositions they semantically express. By parity of reasoning, then, this supposition should also apply to utterances of sentences

containing filled names. There too the Pragmatic Descriptivist must suppose that our intuitions about truth-value are driven by our tendency to confuse information semantically expressed with information pragmatically imparted. But there's the rub. As Donnellan's and Kripke's semantic, epistemic, and modal arguments show, our intuitions about the truth-value of utterances of sentences containing filled names are not parasitic on our intuitions about the truth-value of the descriptive propositions allegedly pragmatically imparted by these utterances. For example, although we recognize that it is necessarily the case that the teacher of Plato is a teacher, we have no temptation to suppose that it is necessarily the case that Aristotle is a teacher. All in all, this sort of consideration casts doubt on the Pragmatic Descriptivist's hypothesis that we have a tendency to confuse the propositions pragmatically conveyed by utterances of sentences containing empty names with the gappy propositions these utterances allegedly semantically express (Everett 2003, 21-25).

### *C. The Different Descriptions Problem*

It often happens that different speakers associate different definite descriptions with the same filled name. You might think of Venus as the morning star and I might think of it as the evening star. Still, as it seems, if you and I both utter "Venus does not exist", we are both saying the same thing. As Everett points out, the same can happen in the case of empty names. He imagines the following example (Everett 2003, 25):

Suppose...that ten years ago you read *Faust Part I* while I read *Faust Part II*.

Since then we have forgotten most of what we read, even the author, and...we

mistakenly misremember various things happening in the fiction which did not really happen in it. Intuitively, however, I suggest that there is a sense in which the utterances you and I currently make of “Faust does not exist” and the utterances you and I made ten years ago, all say the same thing.

The problem, as Everett sees it, is that “we take the propositional content of utterances containing empty names to be stable across speakers and times in a way that the descriptions we associate with those names are not.” Everett concludes that “contra the [Pragmatic Descriptivist], our intuitions concerning what utterances of “Faust does not exist” say are not to be explained by holding that we confuse what such utterances pragmatically convey with their literal semantic content” (Everett 2003, 26).

#### *D. The No Descriptions Problem*

It can happen that a speaker associates no uniquely identifying description with a name, and this can happen as easily in the case of empty names as it can in the case of filled names. Under such circumstances, it is impossible for an utterance of a sentence containing the relevant name to pragmatically impart any descriptive proposition. And yet, contrary to what Pragmatic Descriptivism predicts, we still have the intuition that these utterances express something that has truth-value. Here is Everett’s own example (Everett 2003, 28):

Peter is making up a story about someone called “Henri”. Stacie and I hear him use the name “Henri” but we do not listen to what he is saying and we associate

no descriptive conditions with the name. A long time passes, Stacie and I remember hearing the name “Henri” but we do not remember where we heard it. I say to Stacie: “Henri doesn’t exist.” I have spoken truly.

## 2. Adams and Dietrich’s Replies to Everett’s Criticisms and Why They Fail

In a recent paper, Adams and Dietrich (2004) respond to all four of Everett’s criticisms. I will now present their responses, explaining how and why the first succeeds, while the other three fail.

### *A. Adams and Dietrich on the Modal Profiles Problem*

The Modal Profiles problem stems from the fact that our intuitions tell us that an utterance U of a sentence such as “Santa Claus is identical to John Perry” is necessarily false. Adams and Dietrich agree that Pragmatic Descriptivists can account for these intuitions neither by supposing that speakers derive the modal profile of U from the modal profile of the proposition semantically expressed by U nor by supposing that speakers derive the modal profile of U from the modal profile of the proposition pragmatically conveyed by U. Rather, as they argue, speakers derive the modal profile of an utterance such as U from its *logical form*. As they put it (Adams and Dietrich 2004, 137):

“a=a” is a sentence schema for expressing necessary truths. There must be a filled name on both sides of the identity sign and the names on either side must

name the same individual. So, our modal intuitions are that any sentence of this form, if it expresses a truth at all, will express a necessary truth...[W]e know that ‘Santa’ and ‘Perry’ do not name the same individual. So we know that if [U] expresses a falsehood, it will express a necessary falsehood. The intuition of necessity comes from the logical form of the expression.

This reply is sufficient as far as it goes, but it needs to be extended to deal with other potentially recalcitrant examples. The problem is that not all necessary truths are necessary by virtue of logical form. Consider, for example, an utterance U2 of the sentence “John Perry is human”. If true, U2 semantically expresses a (metaphysically) necessary truth, for it is impossible for John Perry to be anything other than human (say, a frog or a turnip). But the logical form of the relevant sentence is “X is F”, which is hardly a “sentence schema for expressing necessary truths.” After all, an utterance of “John Perry is a philosopher”, which is of the form “X is F”, semantically expresses a possible falsehood. So in the case of many sentences containing filled names, our intuitions about the modal profile of utterances of those sentences are not driven by logical form.<sup>8</sup>

But the “logical form” strategy generalizes in a way that serves Adams and Dietrich’s dialectical purpose.<sup>9</sup> The more general point is that any proposition of the form “X is human” is necessarily true if true. This is not because “X is human” has the logical form it does, but because, given the meaning of “human”, “X is human” is a sentence schema for expressing necessary truths (just as “a=a” is a sentence schema for expressing necessary truths). And this modal property explains not only our intuitions

about the modal properties of identity statements, but also our intuitions about the modal properties of other kinds of statements. To illustrate this point, consider the following scenario.<sup>10</sup> You and I are at the pet store and we overhear a customer talking to another about “James”. We don’t grasp any of the information about James that the one customer is trying to pass on to the other. As a result, the only description we associate with “James” is, let us suppose, “The individual called ‘James’ we heard about at the pet store.” Now imagine that the name “James” is empty, and that I produce an utterance U3 of the sentence “James is human.” It is plain that, if U3 semantically expressed a truth, the relevant truth would be (metaphysically) necessary. (After all, everything that is human is necessarily human.) And this fact about U3, though not its logical form, is sufficient to explain our modal intuitions in the case, even if the proposition expressed by U3 has no truth-value and the proposition pragmatically imparted by U3 (namely, that the individual called “James” we heard about at the pet store is human) is (metaphysically) contingent.

I conclude that a suitably generalized version of Adams and Dietrich’s reply to the Modal Profiles problem succeeds. However, as I will now argue, the same cannot be said for Adams and Dietrich’s replies to the three remaining criticisms raised by Everett.

#### *B. Adams and Dietrich on the Filled Names Problem*

The Filled Names problem stems from the widely accepted view that, with respect to utterances of sentences containing *filled* names, we have no tendency to confuse the propositions pragmatically conveyed with the propositions semantically expressed. But it is precisely this widely accepted view that Adams and Dietrich reject. As they see it,

there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that this kind of confusion happens on a regular basis.

To begin, Adams and Dietrich consider a hypothetical situation in which Laura utters the following sentence:

(5) George Washington had wooden teeth.

As they argue (Adams and Dietrich 2004, 134):

Someone [let's say Stan] might easily take Laura to have said that the first president of the U.S. had wooden teeth. Surely if someone overhearing Laura's uttering (5) were asked "what did Laura say?" it would not be unexpected or inappropriate for [Stan] to answer "Laura said that the first U.S. president had wooden teeth".

Adams and Dietrich clearly read the situation as follows. When Laura uttered (5), her utterance semantically expressed the singular proposition

<George Washington, having wooden teeth>,

but pragmatically imparted the descriptive proposition to the effect that the first U.S. president had wooden teeth. Stan's "not unexpected" and "not inappropriate" report to the effect that Laura said that the first U.S. president had wooden teeth reveals that he

takes Laura's utterance to have semantically expressed the proposition she actually pragmatically imparted.

But this is meager evidence indeed. Surely there are other, at least as plausible, ways of accounting for the fact that Stan's report is neither unexpected nor inappropriate. To see this, it helps to notice that, under normal circumstances, Stan's report is appropriate by virtue of the fact that Laura believes that George Washington was the first U.S. president. But suppose that Laura erroneously believes that George Washington was the second U.S. president, that the second U.S. president had wooden teeth, and that the first U.S. president did not have wooden teeth. In such a case, it would be flatly inappropriate for Stan to report that Laura said that the first U.S. president had wooden teeth. For this is something Laura would vehemently deny.

In order to explain the fact that Stan's report is *appropriate*, we need not assume that Stan's report is strictly *accurate*. Instead, we might simply assume that the report, though strictly inaccurate, is not so terribly inaccurate that it becomes worth challenging. Because there is a true statement in the immediate vicinity, it can happen that a strict falsehood simply isn't worth the bother. If we are careful, we should say that Stan is wrong to characterize Laura's statement the way he does: she did not really *say* that the first president of the U.S. had wooden teeth. But since Laura believed that George Washington had wooden teeth and at the same time held that George Washington was the first U.S. president (and so would have assented to the statement that the first U.S. president had wooden teeth), it is not completely misleading to represent her as having asserted (and hence as being committed to the claim) that the first U.S. president had wooden teeth.

Similar remarks apply to Adams and Dietrich's second example. As they describe the relevant scenario (Adams and Dietrich 2004, 134):

Suppose Madonna has acquired the accolade of "the most controversial woman of rock". Everyone comes to associate that description with her. Madonna enters a noisy L.A. bar and Laura is overheard by some to say "Hey look, the most controversial woman of rock is here". Someone else has a hard time hearing and asks "What did she say?" It is so noisy in the bar that the answer he gets back [let's say, from Ollie] is "Madonna is here". To which he replies "Oh, the most controversial woman of rock is here". This seems...to be perfectly ordinary in every way and to be just what our [Pragmatic Descriptivist] theory predicts might happen.

Again, the facts of the situation are readily explained by supposing, not that Ollie *accurately* reported what Laura said, but rather that he provided a *serviceable* (i.e., not terribly misleading) paraphrase of Laura's actual statement. When Ollie reports Laura as having said that Madonna is here, his report is not worth challenging. "It's close enough to the truth," one might say, "and that's good enough for me."<sup>11</sup>

The moral of this story is that Adams and Dietrich haven't provided sufficient reason to believe that, with respect to utterances of sentences containing filled names, speakers have a tendency to confuse the propositions pragmatically conveyed with the propositions semantically expressed. Thus the Filled Names problem remains unaddressed and continues to pose a significant challenge to Pragmatic Descriptivism.

*C. Adams and Dietrich on the Different Descriptions Problem*

According to Adams and Dietrich, the Different Descriptions problem consists in the charge that Pragmatic Descriptivism “will not handle the seeming stability of content of utterances containing empty names across times and speakers.” For if Everett “is likely to associate radically different descriptions with the name ‘Faust’ now than he did ten years ago,” then it would seem that Pragmatic Descriptivists would “have to say that an utterance [U4] of ‘Faust doesn’t exist’ by Everett ten years ago says something different than an utterance [U5] by Everett now” (Adams and Dietrich 2004, 129).

To this charge Adams and Dietrich quite sensibly reply that, according to Pragmatic Descriptivism, U4 and U5 semantically express the same gappy proposition, and hence the semantic content of “Faust doesn’t exist” is stable across time. (*Mutatis mutandis* for the stability of semantic content across speakers.) As they see it, what changes with time is the information pragmatically imparted, not the information semantically expressed. Adams and Dietrich therefore conclude that the Different Descriptions problem misses the mark (Adams and Dietrich 2004, 130):

Everett’s cross-temporal utterances may pragmatically impart different information on different occasions without raising a problem for [Pragmatic Descriptivism]. This is perfectly consistent with [Pragmatic Descriptivism], as long as the semantic content of the utterances does not change, as we maintain it does not.

Now the reason why Adams and Dietrich's response to the Different Descriptions problem fails is not that it is an inadequate rejoinder to the problem *as they understand it*, but rather that *they have misunderstood the problem to begin with*. Although some of what Everett says suggests that the heart of his criticism depends on the claim that the propositional content of U4 is identical to the propositional content of U5, the actual heart of his criticism depends on a different claim, namely that *we take* the propositional content of U4 *to be* identical to the propositional content of U5. The Different Descriptions problem is not that Pragmatic Descriptivism entails that the propositional content of U4 differs from the propositional content of U5; the problem is that Pragmatic Descriptivism *can't account for our intuition* that U4 and U5 semantically express the same thing. For at the heart of Pragmatic Descriptivism is the thesis that we confuse what an utterance pragmatically imparts with what the utterance semantically expresses. So if, as Adams and Dietrich readily admit, U4 and U5 pragmatically impart different propositions, then Pragmatic Descriptivism predicts that *we will take* U4 and U5 to semantically express *different things*. The problem is that this prediction is not borne out. Under these circumstances, pointing out, as Adams and Dietrich do, that Pragmatic Descriptivism does not entail that U4 and U5 semantically express different propositions, is simply beside the point.

Adams and Dietrich's mistake here stems from their having confused the fact *that U4 and U5 semantically express the same thing* with the fact *that speakers take U4 and U5 to semantically express the same thing*. Everett's criticism is that Pragmatic Descriptivism cannot account for the latter, not that Pragmatic Descriptivism cannot account for the former.

It might be replied on Adams and Dietrich's behalf that our intuitions about the stability of semantically expressed content over time and across speakers might be explained by a common invariant core to the propositions pragmatically imparted by the relevant utterances. But what, in the case of U4 and U5, would such a common core look like? As part of Everett's example, we are given that he has forgotten most of *Faust Part II*, that he has forgotten the author of *Faust*, and that he misremembers things happening in the fiction. So, if there is to be a common core to the propositions pragmatically imparted by U4 at T1 and by U5 at T2, it cannot concern the content of the fiction or the author of the fiction. It seems that there is no descriptive content left that could serve as the relevant common core.<sup>12</sup>

I conclude that the Different Descriptions problem remains a serious threat to Pragmatic Descriptivism.

#### *D. Adams and Dietrich on the No Descriptions Problem*

The No Descriptions problem stems from the (putative) existence of possible cases in which a speaker acquires and uses a name without associating *any* definite description with it. These sorts of cases pose a threat because Pragmatic Descriptivism is committed to the view that an utterance of *any* sentence containing an empty name pragmatically conveys a descriptive proposition (where the descriptive element derives from a definite description associated by the speaker with the name).

Adams and Dietrich respond, not unreasonably, that "no descriptions" cases are really impossible. As they see it, "when one acquires a name, to the best of one's abilities, one keeps a file of particulars: where, when, from whom one heard the name"

(Adams and Dietrich 2004, 131-132). Even when a speaker forgets from whom she heard the name, she remembers that she heard it from someone. So, in the “Henri” case, if we suppose that Stacie and I pick up the name “Henri” and then forget the circumstances under which we acquired it, we will still associate “Henri” with the description “the person named ‘Henri’ I heard about from someone.” In this sort of scenario, then, there are descriptive propositions available to be pragmatically imparted by me and Stacie. So, upon reflection, the “Henri” case by itself poses no challenge to Pragmatic Descriptivism.

But to this sort of response Everett has a ready rejoinder, as Adams and Dietrich themselves acknowledge. Everett points out that, as Adams and Dietrich describe the “Henri” case, Stacie and I pragmatically convey *different* descriptive propositions if we both utter “Henri doesn’t exist.” The proposition *I* pragmatically convey is that there is no one named ‘Henri’ that *I* heard about from someone, while the proposition *Stacie* pragmatically conveys is that there is no one named ‘Henri’ that *she* heard about from someone. However, as Everett writes (Everett 2003, 29):

This will not do...If Stacie and I simultaneously uttered [“Henri doesn’t exist”] we would have said the same thing.

To this rejoinder, Adams and Dietrich admit that the different propositions pragmatically imparted by me and Stacie “could not explain the sameness of our sayings.” But, as they argue (in a way reminiscent of their reply to the Different Descriptions problem—Adams and Dietrich 2004, 132):

It is not the sameness of our sayings that needs explaining. That sameness is accounted for by the sameness of the incomplete propositions that [Stacie] and I express by our utterances. What is to be accounted for here is the sameness of appearance of having uttered truths. And this is accounted for even if [Stacie] pragmatically imparts a truth involving her (not me) and I pragmatically impart a truth involving me (not her).

Now it must be acknowledged that, as a response to the letter of Everett's rejoinder, Adams and Dietrich's reply is successful. Everett seems to assume that the Pragmatic Descriptivist thesis that Stacie and I pragmatically convey different propositions when we utter "Henri doesn't exist" is incompatible with the widely held intuition that Stacie and I say the same thing. But, as Adams and Dietrich rightly point out (and as we've already seen), there is no incompatibility here, for one of the pillars of Pragmatic Descriptivism is the thesis that different utterances of the same sentence containing an empty name semantically express the same gappy proposition (and hence, in a perfectly ordinary sense, do indeed say the same thing).

But to say that Adams and Dietrich have articulated a successful reply to the letter of Everett's rejoinder is not to say that their reply successfully handles the spirit of the rejoinder. For what Everett surely *means* is that the hypothesis that Stacie and I pragmatically convey different propositions in uttering "Henri doesn't exist", when combined with the main assumptions of Pragmatic Descriptivism, is incompatible with the fact that *our intuitions tell us that* Stacie and I are saying the same thing. For, as

we've seen, Pragmatic Descriptivists hold that we tend to confuse the propositions that are pragmatically imparted by utterances of sentences containing empty names with what those utterances semantically express. If, as Adams and Dietrich insist, Stacie and I pragmatically convey different propositions when we utter "Henri doesn't exist," then Pragmatic Descriptivism predicts that *our intuitions should tell us that* Stacie and I are saying (i.e., that our utterances semantically express) *different* things in uttering those words. And yet our intuitions in fact tell us the exact opposite.

So Pragmatic Descriptivists face the following dilemma. Either they acknowledge the existence of cases in which a speaker associates no uniquely identifying description with an empty name in her linguistic repertoire (in which case they must acknowledge that the speaker does not pragmatically convey a descriptive proposition when she utters a sentence containing that empty name), or they insist that speakers always associate at least some minimally descriptive information with every empty name (in which case they cannot account for the widely held intuition that, for any sentence S containing an empty name, different utterances of S semantically express the same thing). Either way, the No Descriptions problem remains a serious objection to Pragmatic Descriptivism.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. A Third Way: The Lexical Theory

As I have argued, Adams and Dietrich are able to parry only one of the four problems for Pragmatic Descriptivism raised by Everett. The Filled Names problem, the Different Descriptions problem, and the No Descriptions problem, *when properly understood*, represent insurmountable objections to Pragmatic Descriptivism. Given that other

attempts to rescue Direct Reference theory from the problem of empty names are less than compelling,<sup>14</sup> semantic theorists would do well to consider alternative Non-Descriptivist, Non-Directly-Referential solutions.

The proposal I favor is that the semantic content of an utterance of a proper name N is identical to N itself.<sup>15</sup> This view (call it “the Lexical Theory”) has a number of attractive features. On the one hand, it has none of the disadvantages of Semantic Descriptivism. For on the semantic side, it doesn’t matter whether the description a speaker associates with N successfully picks out N’s referent. On the Lexical Theory, the content of an utterance of N is N; and since the referent of N is whatever gets picked out by the content of N, it turns out that the referent of N is whatever gets picked out by N (which is exactly as it should be). On the modal and epistemic sides, the Lexical Theory simply does not entail that the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of “If N exists, then N=the F” should be either metaphysically necessary or knowable *a priori* to a speaker who associates “the F” with N.

Moreover, the Lexical Theory avoids the classic thorns in the side of Direct Reference theory. For, like Semantic Descriptivism, the Lexical Theory predicts that the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of “N=N” (namely,  $\langle N, \text{identity}, N \rangle$ ) is self-evident while the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of “N=M” (namely,  $\langle N, \text{identity}, M \rangle$ ) is not, and hence that the two sentences will differ in cognitive significance. Further, like Semantic Descriptivism, the Lexical Theory does not entail that co-referential names are intersubstitutable in propositional attitude contexts *salva veritate*. And finally, the Lexical Theory provides a simple solution to the various difficulties spawned by the problem of empty names. For, first, the Lexical Theory takes

empty names to be meaningful rather than meaningless, given that utterances of empty names, just like utterances of filled names, have semantic content. And, second, the Lexical Theory predicts that the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of a sentence containing an empty name is complete, rather than gappy, and thus capable of being either true or false (rather than truth-valueless).

The Lexical Theory also explains something that Semantic Descriptivism and Direct Reference theory cannot explain, which is the fact that we do not take ourselves to understand the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of a sentence containing a name unless we are familiar with the name itself. As an illustration, consider the three sentences S1, S2, and S3:

S1: The cloud is white.

S2: Le nuage est blanc.

S3: Fifi is white.

Our intuitions tell us that the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of S1 (in English) is identical to the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of S2 (in French). So one need not be familiar with the French words “nuage” and “blanc” in order to understand the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of S2. By contrast, it is not possible for a speaker to understand the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance of S3 unless the speaker is already familiar with the name “Fifi”. It is partly for this reason that proper names are special, in fact unique, lexical items. The simplest and most obvious way to account for this phenomenon is to suppose

that “Fifi” itself is a constituent of the proposition expressed by an utterance of S3, which is exactly what the Lexical Theory predicts. With respect to explaining this phenomenon, Semantic Descriptivism and Direct Reference theory are left holding the bag.<sup>16</sup>

The Lexical Theory, then, is simple, powerful, immune to the standard counterexamples to Semantic Descriptivism and Direct Reference theory, and capable of explaining linguistic phenomena that its competitors cannot explain.<sup>17</sup>

It might be objected that the Lexical Theory cannot account for the fact that we take utterances of the following sentences to express the same proposition, for the Lexical Theory tells us that they don’t:

(S4) Santa Claus is jolly.

(S5) Kris Kringle is jolly.

(S6) Saint Nick is jolly.

(S7) Father Christmas is jolly.<sup>18</sup>

To this objection, I reply that we do not, in fact, take utterances of these sentences to express the same proposition. Of course, to those of us who know that ‘Santa Claus’, ‘Kris Kringle’, ‘Saint Nick’, and ‘Father Christmas’ are used interchangeably, it doesn’t much matter (whatever one’s purpose may be) whether someone utters S4, S5, S6, or S7. But it is certainly possible for a child to pick up the four different names from four unrelated sources in completely different contexts, in such a way that she takes the names to refer to four different individuals. In such circumstances, surely very few (if any) speakers not already wedded to a particular semantic theory of proper names would take

the child's four utterances to express a single proposition in four different ways. Indeed, it seems possible for the child to (rationally) assent to the proposition expressed by an utterance of S1 without assenting to the proposition expressed by an utterance of S2, for the child to (rationally) assent to the proposition expressed by an utterance of S2 without assenting to the proposition expressed by an utterance of S3, and so on.<sup>19</sup>

I conclude that the arguments of this paper establish two results. The first is that the Pragmatic Descriptivist gambit in defense of the Unfilled Proposition version of Direct Reference theory ultimately fails. The second is that there is an attractive alternative to Semantic Descriptivism and Direct Reference theory (namely, the Lexical Theory) that avoids the problems that beset each, including, most notably, the problem of empty names.

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful summary of the classic arguments against Semantic Descriptivism, see Soames (2002, 18-24).

<sup>2</sup> On Frege’s Puzzle, see Salmon (1986) and Braun (2002). On the problem of substitution, see Salmon (1986; 1989; 1990), Soames (1987a; 1987b), Crimmins and Perry (1989), Richard (1990), Crimmins (1992), and Braun (1998).

<sup>3</sup> Or, at least, with what those who accept the existence of propositions consider to be a platitude.

<sup>4</sup> Donnellan (1974) defends a position of this sort.

<sup>5</sup> See note 3.

<sup>6</sup> For further criticisms of Braun’s solution to the Problem of Truth, see Everett (2003, 9-13).

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<sup>7</sup> See Ryckman (1988), Adams and Stecker (1994), Adams, Fuller, and Stecker (1993; 1997), and Taylor (2000). Soames (2002) defends a related strategy. For independent criticisms of Soames' version of this strategy, see Sider and Braun (2006) and Caplan (2007). For other strategies, see Braun (1993; 2005), Salmon (1998), and Everett (2000).

<sup>8</sup> An anonymous referee suggests that logical forms may in fact be individuated more finely than I have suggested, and, in particular, that the logical form of "John Perry is human" is not [X + copula + predicate] but rather [X + copula + kind term]. If this were true, then it would indeed be possible for the modal profile of a sentence such as "John Perry is human" to be driven by its logical form. This is because whenever a kind term is truthfully predicated of an individual, the individual possesses the relevant kind property necessarily.

However, the claim that logical forms are individuated as finely as the anonymous referee suggests is *ad hoc*. I am aware of no linguistic evidence that favors the fine individuation hypothesis. Logical form is the feature of a proposition that explains its logical properties (which propositions logically follow from it, which propositions it logically follows from). But the fact that "human" is a kind term plays no role in explaining why "John Perry is human" follows from "Everything is human" or why "Something is human" follows from "John Perry is human". Indeed, I am not aware of any relation of logical consequence that can be explained by adverting to the fact that a predicate stands for a natural kind. For more on logical form, see Pietroski (1999/2009).

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<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for the line of argument presented in this paragraph.

<sup>10</sup> I owe this example to Dana Nelkin.

<sup>11</sup> An anonymous referee points out, rightly, that there are views (such as Soames's) according to which it can happen that a speaker says or asserts a proposition that is not semantically expressed by her utterance. If a view of this sort is right, then Adams and Dietrich are not entitled to infer that someone who reports Laura as having *said* that the first U.S. president had wooden teeth must take her utterance of "George Washington had wooden teeth" to *semantically express* the proposition that the first U.S. president had wooden teeth. It also follows that Adams and Dietrich are not entitled to infer that someone who reports Laura as having *said* that the most controversial woman or rock is here must take her utterance of "Madonna is here" to *semantically express* the proposition that the most controversial woman of rock is here.

In this paper, I do not take a position on the question of whether a view such as Soames's is correct. If it is, then Adams and Dietrich's position faces a difficulty in addition to the difficulty raised in the main text.

<sup>12</sup> Adams and Dietrich (2004, 103) themselves suggest that "Everett may associate with 'Faust' on both occasions that this is 'a central figure in Goethe's work of the same name'." But, apart from the fact that the suggested descriptive common core is not uniquely identifying, the suggestion itself is inconsistent with the premises of Everett's

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example. For Everett stipulates that he has forgotten the author of *Faust Part II*, and thus it is no longer possible at T2 for him to pragmatically impart anything about Goethe in uttering “Faust does not exist”.

Adams and Dietrich (2004, 103) also suggest that Everett’s (pragmatically) imparting information about the same Faust can be explained by “the causal history of Everett’s use tracing back to Goethe’s use”. But what a speaker pragmatically imparts by means of an utterance is, at least in part, a function of what he is in a position to know (or believe). So if Everett (as we may imagine) is ignorant of the causal history of his use of ‘Faust’, it is not possible for him to pragmatically impart anything about this causal history.

<sup>13</sup> An anonymous referee suggests that Adams and Dietrich might be able to handle the No Descriptions problem by appeal to a descriptive common core pragmatically imparted by different speakers, in much the way they attempt to handle the Different Descriptions problem (see above, pp. 18-19). But for the same reasons pointed out at the end of my discussion of Adams and Dietrich’s reaction to the Different Descriptions problem and in note 12, the “common core” gambit fails. In the “Henri” case, there is no descriptive common core that Stacie and I both associate with the name, and it is possible for both of us to be completely ignorant of the causal histories of our uses of this name.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Everett’s (2003) criticisms of Braun (1993) and Salmon (1998).

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<sup>15</sup> The view is obliquely suggested by Kaplan (1989, 599), who writes that “a name might almost serve as its own Fregean *Sinn*” and that “except for serving as content, [names] do all that Fregean *Sinn* is charged with.” The view also has affinities with the Interpreted Logical Form (ILF) theory defended in different ways by Harman (1972), Higginbotham (1986; 1991), Segal (1989), and Larson and Ludlow (1993), and with the Russellian Annotated Matrix (RAM) theory defended by Richard (1990). The ILF and RAM theories are theories of the semantic values of that-clauses that appeal to the lexical items in those clauses. The Lexical Theory I propose differs from these theories inasmuch as it provides no account of the semantics of that-clauses. What it does is provide a semantics for proper names, indeed one that contrasts with the Russellian or Millian semantics for proper names that is usually paired with the ILF or RAM theory of that-clauses.

<sup>16</sup> It might be suggested that most of those who claim that we understand the proposition expressed by an utterance of “Le nuage est blanc” just because we understand the proposition expressed by an utterance of “The cloud is white” will be inclined to claim that, even if we haven’t heard the name ‘Londres’, we understand the proposition expressed by an utterance of “Londres est jolie” just because we understand the proposition expressed by an utterance of “London is pretty”. Perhaps they will be so inclined, but if they are, then the *onus probandi* will be on them. For there are still significant differences between the ‘nuage’/‘cloud’ case and the ‘Londres’/‘London’ case. For one, consider that once one learns French and understands both “Le nuage est blanc” and “The cloud is white”, one immediately recognizes that the proposition expressed by an utterance of the one is identical to the proposition expressed by an

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utterance of the other. However, the same thing cannot be said about “Londres est jolie” and “London is pretty”, for it is possible to understand the proposition expressed by an utterance of “Londres est jolie” and the proposition expressed by an utterance of “London is pretty” without thinking that the two utterances express the same proposition. Indeed, this is one reason why it was possible for Kripke (1979) to articulate his famous puzzle about belief.

<sup>17</sup> For further articulation and defense of the Lexical Theory, see Rickless (1996). There I argue that the Lexical Theory, when combined with an ontology of words similar to the one defended in Kaplan (1990), has the resources to explain why it is that an utterance of “Aristotle taught Alexander” (where “Aristotle” is the name of the famous philosopher) and an utterance of “Aristotle taught Alexander” (where “Aristotle” is the name of the famous shipping magnate) express different propositions with different truth-values. I also argue that the Lexical Theory has the resources to dissolve the famous puzzle about belief (see Kripke (1979)).

<sup>18</sup> I wish to thank an anonymous referee for bringing this objection to my attention.

<sup>19</sup> In this paper, I do not provide a complete semantics of proper names. I merely provide an account of the propositional constituents (semantic contents) expressed by utterances of proper names. In Rickless (1996), I offer an account of the truth-conditions of utterances of sentences containing proper names, both filled and empty. But two anonymous referees have separately pressed me to provide more in the way of an account

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of truth-conditions here. One in particular asks whether the Lexical Theory can handle our intuitions that utterances of the following sentences are true:

(S8) Vulcan is identical to Vulcan.

(S9) Vulcan is a planet.

(S10) Vulcan is nonexistent.

(S11) Vulcan is mythical.

Briefly, I favor a theory of truth-conditions according to which an utterance of any sentence of the form “a is F” expresses a true proposition if and only if the referent of ‘a’ possesses the property referred to by the predicate ‘F’. Because ‘Vulcan’ in S8 and S9 is an empty name, the theory of truth-conditions I favor entails that utterances of S8 and S9 are not true. Now it should be clear that utterances of S9 express something false (and so, not true). There are nine planets (possibly eight, with the recent demotion of Pluto), and Vulcan is not among them. So it is false (and hence, not true) to say that Vulcan is a planet. Of course, it might be true to say that *if Vulcan existed, then Vulcan would be a planet*. But the fact is that Vulcan does not exist, and thus the truth of “*If Vulcan existed, then Vulcan would be a planet*” does not provide any reason to think it true that Vulcan is a planet. As for S8, I do accept that our intuitions tell us that utterances of this sentence are true. But this is easily explained by means of the same mechanism to which Adams and Dietrich appeal as part of their explanation for our intuition that utterances of “Santa Claus = Santa Claus” are true. For the logical form of S8 is “a=a” and we all know that utterances of sentences with this form are often and typically true (because, often and

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typically, the relevant name replacing “a” is filled). It is *this* knowledge that explains our intuition that an utterance of S8 is true, even though the utterance is false. The truth of an utterance of S10 is easily explained by the fact that S10 says that it is not the case that there is something identical to Vulcan, and that it is false to say that something is identical to Vulcan. Finally, the sentence S11 is ambiguous, depending on whether ‘Vulcan’ is the name that was introduced to refer to a planet that causes perturbations in the orbit of Mercury or the name for one of the gods of Roman mythology. If the word ‘Vulcan’ in S11 is understood as the former name, then utterances of S11 are false and are intuitively understood as false. But if the word ‘Vulcan’ is understood as the latter name, then utterances of S11 are true and are intuitively understood as true. But in such a case, the name ‘Vulcan’ refers to a mythical entity, a character that is part of Roman mythology, in the same way that ‘Hamlet’ is the name of a character in Shakespeare’s play of the same name. For more on the claim that mythical names are filled rather than empty, see Salmon (1998).