

Contextual Necessities of Proper Names  
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In his paper “Proper Names”, John Searle makes an argument for how proper names refer to objects or people. He explains this relationship by saying that when we use a proper name, we do not assert that a referent has any specific characteristics, but we presuppose that the object has a “sufficient but unspecified number of characteristics” that allow us to uniquely pick out a single referent. In one part of his argument, Searle contrasts proper names with demonstratives, saying that proper names do not need a stage setting or context in order to refer to an object. This doesn’t seem to be the case. In this paper I will briefly outline Searle’s view up to that point in the paper, examine a strong and a weak reading of his assertion regarding context, explain how each of these views could fit into Searle’s theory about proper names, and pose arguments against both interpretations. Finally I will suggest a possible solution for Searle’s problem, and show how it fits in with his full theory on proper names.

Searle points out two conflicting views of proper names. In one view, proper names have a reference but not a sense—for example, when I say “Abraham Lincoln” there is some object that is referred to by “Abraham Lincoln”, but there are no characteristics that are attached to that object by virtue of my referring to it by its proper name. In the other view, proper names have a sense but not necessarily a reference. In this second view, a proper name is like a definite description, and an object is referred to by a proper name if and only if it fits the definite description.

It is when Searle begins attempting to resolve the conflict between these two views of the nature of proper names that I find my problem. He attempts to find how proper names are different from other expressions that refer to objects, such as

demonstratives. Searle says that “unlike demonstratives, a proper name refers without presupposing any stage settings or any special contextual conditions surrounding the utterance of the expression.” (Searle, “Proper Names”, 170) This could be read in two distinct ways. It could be given a strong reading, in which we would take it to mean “proper names never need settings or context in order to refer, unlike demonstratives, which always do.” It could also be read in a weaker fashion, “demonstratives always need settings or context in order to refer, whereas proper names only need them occasionally.” To illustrate the difference between the two readings, consider a situation where I use the proper name “Abraham Lincoln”. Under the first (strong) reading, a person would never need to have any context in order to know whom it is that I am talking about. Under the weaker reading, a person might not need any context, or she may need to know that I am talking about American Presidents, or great speakers, or perhaps she may need to have a complete explanation of what I refer to when I say “Abraham Lincoln”. The weak reading, then, is a less strict version of the strong reading.

It may assist me now to show the role that demonstratives play in our language. Demonstratives such as “this”, “that”, and “the other thing” are used in place of proper names when objects are nearby and can be indicated either by physical gestures, by the object’s proximity to either the speaker or the listener. Demonstratives can also be used to indicate if there are some contextual clues that would give meaning to the demonstrative. As is obvious by their definition, demonstratives are entirely reliant on stage settings or context. For example, when there is an orange in your hand and an apple in mine, and I say “take this,” it is meant that you should take the apple. In the same situation if I were to say “give me that,” it would mean that you should give me the orange. The objects referred to by the demonstratives in these examples are completely

dependent on the stage setting. In another example, if we are talking about persimmons and I say “I don’t like them,” I mean that I do not like persimmons. The demonstrative has taken its meaning based on the context of the conversation.

Now it is more evident what John Searle means under the strong interpretation. He means that when we use a name, people will not need any setting or context to understand what the referent is. When I use the name “Abraham Lincoln,” Abe does not have to be standing nearby in his tall hat, nor do we have to be discussing American Presidents or great speakers. People will know what the referent is by virtue of the proper name.

What this would mean in Searle’s theory is that proper names enjoy a position very distant from the characteristics of the referent, yet very closely tied to the referent itself. Proper names would, under this interpretation, be able to pick out a unique referent without there being any common uniquely identifying characteristic in the minds of any people involved. All the people using the proper name would still need to have a sufficient number of characteristics to uniquely identify the referent, but they would not need to have any of these characteristics in common with the other people using the proper name.

Under the weak interpretation of Searle’s statement, we might occasionally need a context or a specific stage setting in order for a referent to be picked out by the use of a proper name, but it is not always the case. For example, when you and I both know one person with the name “Dave” and we are speaking to one another, we have no need of a context when one of us uses the name “Dave”. If another person were to enter our conversation, and this person were to know multiple people with the name “Dave”, our work would get a bit more difficult. We may need to use a context, to refer to the object

as “blue-haired Dave”, or if the object that we are referring to is standing nearby, we may indicate him with our finger or a nod of our head.

Under the weak interpretation, names enjoy the same distance from characteristics as they do under the strong interpretation, but in this case we recognize that some people may need to know an identifying characteristic in order for the name to uniquely identify an object. In some cases, people will need to share a uniquely identifying characteristic of the referent in order for everyone to know that they are referring to the same object.

The problem is that neither of these options truly seems to be the case. Under the strong argument, when I use a proper name in a conversation with you, you don’t need to have the same characteristics in mind when you think of the object I referred to. But doesn’t that pose a problem when I’m talking about Michael Jordan my high school teacher rather than Michael Jordan the basketball player? Without a context and/or a setting it would be nearly impossible for anyone listening to me refer to a “Michael Jordan” to pick out which of the objects I meant. By this point the weak argument falls as well, since if we cannot find a case where a context and/or a setting is unnecessary, the weak argument must merely state that we do need a context or a setting. This is a related argument, but quite clearly not what Searle was intending to show when he said that proper names refer without presupposing any stage settings or contextual conditions of the kind that demonstratives presuppose. Under the other option of the weak argument, if you and I both know only one person named Dave, that is the context under which we are working.

We are left with the option that Searle explicitly argues against—that we need to have some sort of context in order for proper names to correctly refer to an object.

Since there needs to be some setting or context in order for a proper name to effectively refer, let us examine what role that setting or context would perform in speech. When my friend Dave is standing nearby and I use the proper name “Dave”, gesturing at him, the other people around me know who it is that I am talking about. And why is that? It is because I have offered them a uniquely identifying characteristic of Dave, and they are able to pick him out in this conversation no matter how many other objects named “Dave” they know. On the same vein, if we are discussing wrestling and someone uses the proper name “Dan Gable” in the sentence “I went to one of Dan Gable’s camps”, it will be obvious to those who follow wrestling which Dan Gable is being referred to in this sentence. Once again, the people in the conversation have been given a uniquely identifying characteristic of this Dan Gable (he runs wrestling camps) thanks to the context. If there were several Dan Gables who ran wrestling camps, it might be necessary to specify a time and a place where this wrestling camp was held. In any case, it looks as though context and setting are useful in that they provide us with a uniquely identifying characteristic for the referent.

What about the case where I know only one Dave, there is no person standing nearby for you to gesture at, and you use the name “Dave”? I will examine my idea of the characteristics *in light of the context you have provided* and decide whether or not we are thinking of the same object. If I decide that we are not—if by your speech you either contradict some of my known characteristics or indicate that Dave was doing something that the Dave I know wouldn’t or couldn’t do—I will ask you to describe Dave, to give me more characteristics by which to identify him. It may turn out that we are thinking about the same object, but some of my known characteristics are no longer true or were

never true. Still, we will need to have some context in order for us to effectively communicate about an object.

Context and setting appear to be a way for more than one person to have the same uniquely identifying characteristic for an object. In a wrestling context there is the uniquely identifying characteristic of being associated with wrestling. In a classroom setting there is the characteristic of being the object “Alex” that I’m looking or pointing at. It appears that these characteristics are necessary in order for multiple people to be able to identify the same object with a proper name.

A possible counter-example to this stance is the case where you use the name “Nicky” and I happen to pick the correct object from the multiple objects that I refer to as “Nicky”. In this case there is no context or setting, there are no shared uniquely identifying characteristics between us. I have picked the correct object seemingly from nowhere, but we are indeed thinking about the same object and using the same proper name to refer to it. It would seem in this case that there is no need for context. But what good is this? If I have randomly selected the correct object that you are referring to without context or setting, how can I be certain that I have selected the correct one? Without stage settings or contextual conditions the fact that I have picked out the correct object is worthless. I have no way of verifying that the object I am thinking of is the one that you are referring to without using the setting or context.

Another possible counterexample to this stance is if we were to imagine a person who perceives the world in a different way from everyone else. What if this person were to refer to an object by a proper name? This person could believe that when he says “Mark Sandbo” he is referring to a seven-foot-tall orange stalk of broccoli. What he perceives as an oversized stalk of broccoli, other people perceive as a man. The object

that they are referring to is the same, but it is possible that none of their identifying characteristics are the same. Context will not help in this case, since it is doubtful that the person perceiving the object “Mark Sandbo” will believe that the object he is referring to is a wrestling coach and a football player.

In this situation, the confused person is unable to effectively communicate any of his ideas about the object referred to as “Mark Sandbo”. Without any characteristics in his mind in common with the people to whom he is talking the confused person will be unable to effectively communicate about the object. The proper name “Mark Sandbo” will be of no use for this person when talking to others. If they are in a setting where Mark is standing nearby, and the confused person is to gesture at Mark when referring to him, other people will be able to correctly identify who the confused person is referring to. In this case, the object will have a characteristic that is known by multiple people. When in a stage setting and having the helpful uniquely identifying characteristic of being the “stalk of broccoli over there”, other people will be able to explain to the confused person how they perceive the object. Once again, the proper name is only useful when the people using it have some common characteristic in mind for the referent.

What we have now is the idea that when we use a proper name, we must have some sort of setting or context in order for another person to uniquely identify the object that we are referring to. The referent must have one or more uniquely identifying characteristics that all the people discussing it have in mind in order for them to communicate effectively about the object. This idea fits in fairly well with the rest of Searle’s theory of proper names. Along with the idea of having a sufficient but unspecified number of characteristics with which to uniquely identify an object we simply add our idea: When we are using a proper name in conversation with someone else we

must share at least one characteristic that we presuppose belongs to the referent. This characteristic is not presupposed by the proper name, but rather is presupposed by the context or setting in which the name is used.