CANADIAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
Volume 37, Number 3, September 2007, pp. 449-462

Empty Names and Pragmatic Implicatures

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I Introduction

What are the meanings of empty names such as 'Vulcan,' 'Pegasus,' and 'Santa Claus' in such sentences as 'Vulcan is the tenth planet,' 'Pegasus flies,' and especially 'Santa Claus does not exist'?

Our view, developed in Adams et al. (1992, 1994, 1997, 2004), consists of a direct-reference account of the meaning of empty names in combination with a pragmatic-implicature account of why we have certain intuitions that seem to conflict with a direct-reference account.

According to the direct-reference theory, the meaning of the name 'Kerry' in the sentence 'Kerry was defeated' is the man John Kerry and the proposition expressed by the whole sentence is that identified by the ordered pair <Kerry, being defeated>, which contains Kerry himself. There are many descriptions commonly associated with 'Kerry,' such as 'candidate for U.S. president in 2004,' 'Vietnam-war veteran

and protester,' and so on, but on the direct-reference theory these are not part of the content of the sentence above. Only the referent of a name figures in the content of the expressed proposition.

What should direct-reference theorists say about sentences with empty names such as 'Vulcan is the tenth planet'? One answer, and this is ours, is that the empty names in such sentences have no meaning and the propositions expressed are incomplete, or gappy. The sentence 'Vulcan is the tenth planet' expresses the gappy proposition <___, being the tenth planet>. This proposition is neither true nor false.

We favor a direct-reference account of both filled and empty names for a number of reasons, which we have developed elsewhere (Adams et al., op. cit.). Besides the intuitions, stressed by Kripke (1972), such as that Aristotle was necessarily Aristotle but not necessarily Alexander's teacher,[1] our account is supported on grounds of simplicity: it is more unified than alternative accounts.[2]

On our view, then, when we utter the sentence

(1a) Santa Claus is F

the name 'Santa Claus' lacks a meaning and the proposition that is expressed by the sentence is the incomplete, or gappy, proposition <_____, being F>, which is neither true nor false. In uttering (1a), however, we also pragmatically imply (or implicate) complete propositions such as that there is a jolly fat man who lives at the North Pole and delivers presents to children on Christmas day and who is F. The mecha-

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1 Jason Stanley (1997) and others have attempted to show that rigidified descriptions can dance around these modal problems. There is some doubt as to whether his arguments here are successful (see Everett, 2005); but even if they are, we still prefer direct reference on the grounds that language has to make direct contact with reality somewhere and we think names are where this contact takes place.

2 We did consider, but reject, free logics. These can assign truth values to sentences with empty names, but differ according to the free logic adopted. For instance, we considered Burge (1991), but it restricts 'For all x, x = x' to cases where 'a' is non-empty. Hence, Burge provides essentially the same solution as we do, but in the medium of free logic. Burge also criticizes free logics that do not contain this restriction, on the ground that they imply clear non-truths, such as that 'the present King of France = the only unicorn on the moon.' We accept Burge's criticism of these alternative free logics. We believe that one's fundamental views about truth or falsity of such sentences guides the restrictions one incorporates into one's rules of inference or methods of determining logical truths, not vice versa.

nisms by which such implicatures are conveyed are those of associated descriptions[3] and Gricean pragmatic conveyance (Grice 1989).

What is especially important is that this pragmatic component of our view enables us to handle what looks like a strong objection to our claim that sentences with empty names are neither true nor false. This is the strong intuition that the sentence

(1b) Santa Claus does not exist

is clearly true. Our overall view explains this intuition by distinguish between what is literally expressed and what is pragmatically implicated. The sentence (1b) literally express the incomplete proposition <_____, non existence>, which has no truth value, but it also pragmatically imparts the complete proposition that would be expressed by substituting the associated definite descriptions for 'Santa Claus' in (1b). When we substitute in, e.g., 'the jolly fat man who lives at the North Pole, etc.' for 'Santa Claus' we get

(1c) The jolly fat man who lives at the North Pole, etc. does not exist.

The complete proposition that the above sentence expresses, when glossed in the familiar Russellian way (in which existence is not a first-order property of objects but something like a second-order property of properties) is the proposition that there is no unique x such that x is a jolly fat man who lives at the North Pole.[4] This pragmatically implicated proposition is complete and (*pace* the author of the letter 'Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus') clearly true.

In a recent article (2007) Mitch Green criticizes our view of empty names. He calls the pragmatic part of our account 'the pragmatic defense' and argues that this pragmatic defense fails. He thereby implicitly

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3 For a detailed account of descriptions associated with names, see Adams and Dietrich 2004, 125-7.

4 To elaborate a bit, the way that implicatures get generated from descriptions associated with names is as follows. We start with a sentence of the form 'N is F,' transform it into 'the D is F' by replacing the name with the associated description(s), and then gloss the latter in a Russellian fashion. If 'the jolly fat man, etc.' is the description associated with the name 'Santa Claus,' then the implicature of 'Santa is happy' is 'The jolly fat man, etc. is happy,' which becomes 'There is a unique jolly fat man, etc. and he is happy.' The implicature of 'Santa does not exist' first becomes 'The jolly fat man, etc. does not exist' and finally turns into 'It is not the case that there is a unique fat man.'

casts doubt on our whole direct-reference package. According to Green, there are a number of types of familiar mechanisms that can generate pragmatic implicatures: conversational and conventional mechanisms, discussed in detail by Grice, and other mechanisms, such as ones involving expression, that are neither conversational nor conventional. Green argues that none of these familiar mechanisms can generate the implicatures needed by our view.

We could try to counter Green by showing that there are unfamiliar mechanisms, mechanisms other than those that he mentions, that can generate the kind of implicatures that we need. Indeed, towards the end of his paper Green allows that this is a possible way to save the pragmatic defense, although he is skeptical of it (Green, 443).

Luckily, we will not have to take this route. The main purpose of our paper is to show that our view works despite Green's suggestions to the contrary. We shall show that Green's arguments that the Gricean mechanisms of conversational or a conventional implicature cannot generate the implicatures that our view needs are seriously flawed. Towards the end of our paper we shall also briefly sketch an account of what the relevant Gricean mechanisms might be.

II Conversational Implicatures

We hold that there is a pragmatic implicature from our saying

(1b) Santa Claus does not exist

to the proposition that

(1d) There is no jolly fat man who lives at the North Pole.

Green first argues that this implicature cannot be a case of Gricean conversational implicature, in other words, that it cannot be generated by the familiar mechanisms described by Grice (Grice, 24-40). Why not? According to Green, Gricean conversational implicatures are cancelable, whereas our implicatures from sentences with names to sentences with substituted associated descriptions are not (Green, 432-439).

An implicature of a sentence is cancelable if there is a context, which may be a verbal one, in which I could utter the sentence and (speaker) mean only its literal meaning and further 'ordinary speakers [could] readily discern that S's literal meaning is speaker meant' (434). For example, we could cancel the pragmatic implicature of 'Eva got pregnant and got married' by saying 'Eva got pregnant and got married, though not necessarily in that order' (435). Hearing the original sentence in

this broader verbal context, the ordinary speaker can easily discern that we mean the original conjunctive sentence in a merely truth-functional way and not as entailing anything about the temporal order of the events referred to.

Green holds that the empty-names implicatures, such as that from (1b) to (1d), are not cancelable and so cannot be cases of familiar conversational implicature. In order for the (1b) to (1d) implicature to be cancelable there would have to be a context in which we could utter (1b) and express only (1b)'s literal meaning, namely the incomplete proposition <_____, non existence>, without meaning (1d). Our hearers would be able to recognize that our utterance of (1b) in the cancellation context has no truth value; the utterance would be heard as failing to express a complete proposition (434), in other words, as being meaningless. According to Green, there are no such contexts, at least for many empty-names sentences.

Why does he think this? He considers three sentences containing the empty name 'Vulcan' uttered by the astronomer Leverrier after he has engaged in various calculations. If the pragmatic implications of empty-names sentences, and in particular of the sentences 'Vulcan exists' and 'Vulcan does not exist,' are generated by Gricean conversational mechanisms, then each of the three sentences should successfully cancel its relevant implication and result in its audience clearly hearing its antecedent clause as meaningless. According to Green, none of the sentences does this.

Leverrier utters the first sentence, (2a), after becoming convinced that 'the planet he postulated, Vulcan, to account for the perturbations … of Mercury' exits but has left its orbit and is heading for the Asteroid Belt (435). Leverrier says,

> **(2a)** [Green's 13] Vulcan exists, but there is no planet between Mercury and the Sun.

A few days later, however, Leverrier realizes that his calculations were wrong and that Vulcan turns out not to exist: rather there is 'some other celestial body between Mercury and the Sun — some prodigal member of the Kuiper Belt that has recently strayed…' (436). He now says,

> **(2b)** [14] Vulcan does not exist, but there is a planet between Mercury and the Sun.

Finally, supposing that he lives long enough, Leverrier learns about general relativity and realizes that 'nothing even remotely like Vulcan could have accounted for the behavior of Mercury' (439). He says,

> **(2c)** [16] Vulcan does not exist: In fact, no planet accounts for of the precession of Mercury's perihelion. I now realize that phenomenon is accounted for in entirely different terms. In fact, even if Vulcan had existed it would not have accounted for Mercury's behavior.

Green thinks that the each of the three sentences above, (2a), (2b) and 2c), 'cancels the implicatum alleged [by our direct-reference view] to be being confused with the literal content of [the antecedent]' (435). Nevertheless, the antecedent of all three are still meant and heard, by Leverrier (as well as his possible audience), as quite meaningful (435, 436).

An obvious objection to Green's argument that the antecedents of Leverrier's first two utterances above, (2a) and (2b), are not cancelable is that Green is wrong about the relevant descriptions that Leverrier has attached to 'Vulcan.' A plausible story, indeed one that Green seems to accept (435), is that Leverrier, and perhaps his scientific colleagues, introduced the name 'Vulcan' with the help of various attempted, but ultimately unsuccessful, reference-fixing descriptions, such as 'planet that *now* orbits (and previously orbited) the Sun,' 'planet that is *now* between Mercury and the Sun,' and 'planet that *now* explains the perturbations of Mercury.' On our direct-reference theory of empty names these descriptions are associated with but do not give the meaning of 'Vulcan': rather they, or sentences containing them, are pragmatically implied by the antecedents of Leverrier's utterances.[5] What is important is that these associated descriptions contain the temporal indicator 'now.' On this plausible account of the matter neither (2a) nor (2b) cancels Leverrier's associated descriptions, even partially.

We can suppose that Leverrier introduces 'Vulcan' in, say, January, 1859, and that his utterance of (2a), occurs some time afterwards, say, in June, 1859. Then the antecedent of (2a) pragmatically implies 'There is something that was in January, 1859, a planet between Mercury and the Sun.' The consequent of (2a) gets interpreted as 'There is in June, 1859, no planet between Mercury and the Sun.' There is of course no conflict between the antecedent's implicature and the consequent and so it is no wonder that Leverrier can take and hear himself as speaking meaningfully in uttering the antecedent 'Vulcan exists.' On the other hand if in June of 1859 he were to say, 'Vulcan exists, but there never was a planet between Mercury and the Sun and never was a planet that explained Mercury's behavior, and so on,' then surely Leverrier, and his contem-

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5 On our rejection of the view that the associated descriptions give the meaning of an empty name, see Adams et al. (1992), footnote 22.

porary audience, would have little, if any, understanding of what he was talking about. In other words, he and his audience would, or at least should, hear the antecedent as expressing an incomplete proposition. Similar remarks can be made about (2b).

Leverrier's utterance (2c) consists of two alleged cancellation sentences. The first sentence, 'Vulcan does not exists: In fact, no planet accounts for the precession of Mercury's perihelion,' is not a cancellation sentence at all, even if we revise the consequent to include the phrase 'no planet has ever accounted for the precession.' This first sentence rather than canceling part of the pragmatic implication of the antecedent, 'Vulcan does not exist,' namely the implicature, 'It is not the case that there ever has been a planet that accounts for the behavior of Mercury,' endorses it! Green here seems to be confusing canceling an implicature partly generated by an associated description and showing that the description fails to be satisfied.

The second sentence of (2c), 'Even if Vulcan had existed it would not have accounted for Mercury's behavior,' does cancel some of the relevant pragmatic implications, but it fails as a complete cancellation sentence because there are other descriptions in Leverrier's overall set that he can hang on to. If Leverrier were asked what he meant by (2c), he might say that he intended to convey that even if there had been a planet in the solar system between the Sun and Mercury, it would not have accounted for Mercury's behavior.

Green draws an interesting comparison between filled-name and empty-name sentences. His comparison is underdeveloped but the following, we think, fairly captures its gist. Compare Ken's utterance of

> **(2d)** George Washington exists, but none of lore associated with 'Washington' is true: he never chopped down a cherry tree, commanded an army, was president of the United States, etc.

to Ken's utterance of

> **(2e)** Vulcan does exist, but none of the lore associated with 'Vulcan' is true: Vulcan never was a planet, never was between Mercury and the Sun, etc.

We can describe circumstances, Green thinks, in which the antecedents of both (2d) and (2e) are 'construed' as meaningful. Both utterances, however, seem to be cancellation sentences. Green believes that if our direct-reference pragmatic account is correct, we should hear the antecedents of *both* as meaningless! On our account, the antecedent of (2d) is of course meaningful since 'George Washington' does refer and that of (2e) is meaningless since 'Vulcan' does not. What is at issue is how

we will *hear* the utterances. If both of the utterances are complete cancellations, then we should hear both the antecedents as meaningless. Green's point is that we do not.

Consider the case of (2d). Ken might utter (2d) if having become somewhat philosophically sophisticated, he discovered that there was an appropriate causal chain linking his use of 'George Washington' back to some 19th-century Vermont woman. But in that case Ken would have a certain description in mind associated with 'George Washington,' namely, the description 'object to which my use of "George Washington" refers.' This description once again does not give the meaning of 'George Washington' in Ken's utterance of (2d), but it appears in the pragmatic implicature of the antecedent, 'There is an object referred by my use of "George Washington".' So, (2d) is not a complete cancellation sentence.

Similar remarks apply to (2e). Ken might have picked up the name 'Vulcan' as well as the standard associated descriptions from various friends and then mistakenly come to believe that 'Vulcan' was in fact connected by a causal chain to some mountain in Norway. Here what the antecedent of (2e) would pragmatically convey would be 'There is an object to which my use of "Vulcan" refers.' So, it turns out that here as well, (2e) is not a full cancellation sentence.

Now it may be true that no matter the context in which a sentence containing an empty name such as 'Vulcan' is uttered, most people cannot shake the strong impression of the sentence sounding meaningful. This generalization might well apply to Leverrier and his audience in the examples above and for that matter in examples in which the implicatures are completely canceled. But there may be all sorts of psychological reasons for this. Indeed, as Green himself points out earlier[6], 'most language processing, at the syntactic, semantic, and even pragmatic levels is unconscious (more specifically, "pre-conscious") and proceeds outside conscious awareness' (432). If psychological unshakeability, however, is the only explanation of why empty-names sentences continue to sound meaningful in any context, this does not show that these sentences are not cancelable. Rather what it shows is that cancelability is one thing and making a psychological illusion go away another.[7]

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6 In this section of his paper Green is criticizing Reimer (2001), who argues that speaker intuitions about 'the truth conditions of sentences will be sensitive to her learning a philosophical theory' (Green, 421).

7 The distinction between cancelability and making the illusion go away is tricky. The analogy between intellectually coming to believe that the two lines are equal in the Muller-Lyer illusion and actually removing the illusion is not quite the analogy that we need. This is because a lot of theory goes into coming to believe that

Green produces a second argument involving cancelability to show that a subclass of implications that our direct-reference view accepts cannot be accounted for by the mechanisms of conversational implicature. In the great majority of cases, if not in all cases, the description 'being called "N"' is part of the lore associated with a name, N, and this is so 'even in the most exiguous of contexts' (436). We can agree with this and with the consequence that a sentence such as 'Santa Claus is coming to town' pragmatically implicates the proposition that the unique man named 'Santa Claus' is coming to town.

Now Green goes on to suggest that this subclass of implicatures cannot be conversational ones. This is because conversational implicatures not only can be canceled, but also can be canceled 'without the speaker saying something false — not to mention self-evidently false' (437). Supposedly, our needed subclass of implicatures cannot be canceled without saying something false. And so they are not conversational implicatures.

Here is Green's argument. Suppose we say:

(3a) Zeus throws thunderbolts.

Given that 'being called "Zeus"' is an associated description of 'Zeus,' Green assumes that (3a) pragmatically implies the proposition that Zeus is called 'Zeus' and that we should be able to cancel this pragmatic implication of (3a) by saying:

(3b) Zeus throws thunderbolts, though Zeus is not called 'Zeus'

'without being in error by virtue of the falsity of [the] second conjunct. Yet … this is not something [we] can do.' This is because 'Zeus is not called "Zeus",' in contexts where 'Zeus' has an established usage (and this is the context of (3a) and (3b), is self-evidently false. It follows 'that being called "N" cannot be what is conversationally implicated by an occurrence of N' (437).

Let us grant for the sake of the argument that Gricean conversational implicatures can be canceled without the speaker saying something false. Still, Green's argument here fails for two reasons. First, on our view what is pragmatically implicated by (3a) in virtue of the associa-

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the Muller-Lyer lines are equal. We don't want cancelability to involve much theory, especially if the theory is the empty-names account that we are defending; for that would be circular. However, the cancellations above, such as (2c) and 'Vulcan does not exist, but that is not to say that nothing is named "Vulcan",' do not seem to require much theory on the part of the hearer.

tion of 'being called "Zeus"' with 'Zeus' is not that Zeus is called 'Zeus' but rather the proposition that

> **(3c)** There is a unique god called 'Zeus.'[8]

To cancel the implicature (3c) of (3a) we should say, not (3b), but rather (3d):

> **(3d)** Zeus throws thunderbolts, though there is no unique god named 'Zeus.'

And the consequent conjunct of (3d) is clearly *true*!

Second, suppose, however, that we assume with Green that (3a) does pragmatically imply that Zeus is called 'Zeus' and that this implicature can be canceled by saying 'Zeus is not called "Zeus".' Still Green's argument does not go through. The argument hangs on Green's claim that 'Zeus is not called "Zeus"' is obviously false. But it is not. On our theory, since 'Zeus' is empty, 'Zeus is not called "Zeus"' is not false but rather has no truth value. Further, the sentence pragmatically implies 'The god called "Zeus" is not called "Zeus",' a perfectly plausible disambiguation of which is 'There is no unique god called "Zeus" and not called "Zeus".' [9] The latter sentence is not false either: indeed, it is obviously true.

II Conventional Implicatures

Green's arguments that the implicatures that our view accepts and needs, such as those from (1b) to (1d) and from (3a) to (3c), are not conventional implicatures also fails for similar reasons.

Conventional implicatures differ from conversational ones insofar as attempts to cancel the former give rise to 'bizarre-in-virtue-of meaning' sentences such as, 'She was Italian but intelligent, which is not for a

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8 The way that implicatures are generated from descriptions is elaborated in footnote 4 above. Green is assuming that 'being called "Zeus"' is a description associated with the name 'Zeus.' In that case the relevant implicature of 'Zeus throws thunderbolts' is 'There is a unique x called "Zeus," and etc.' if the description is the only one, or 'There is a unique x such that x is called "Zeus" and is F, G, and etc.' if the description is one of many.

9 Here again, we are following Russell's view that a sentence such as the 'The present King of France is not bald' has two readings: where the description has narrow scope the sentence comes out true; where it has broad scope it comes out false.

moment to suggest a conflict between being Italian and being intelligent' (440). For Green, moreover, conventional implicatures 'are in the very least a species of commitment…. When I assert "She was poor but honest" then while I do not assert there is a contrast or tension between poverty and honesty, I do commit myself to there being such a tension' (442).

How does Green argue that our empty names implicatures cannot be conventional ones? He focuses on implicatures involving the associated property of the form *being named 'N.'* He proceeds in the following way. He proposes that there is a conventional rule that says that an 'utterance of "N is F" in a speech act … implicates that there is a unique object named "N"' (440). Second, he considers the case in which I say:

(4) Vulcan does not exist.

According to the above conventional rule and to the commitment feature, in uttering (4) I am committing myself to the proposition that there is 'at least one object by the name of "Vulcan"' (442). But this supposedly conventional implicated proposition is false, whereas (4) is intuitively true. The conventional account, then, cannot account for our intuitions that (4) is true. Indeed, it leads us to predict that in uttering empty-names sentences 'I will commit myself to something incompatible with what I am trying to assert' (442).

We do not have to look far, however, to see where Green has gone wrong. The conventional rule that he suggests is quite implausible. Rather, the appropriate rule should be as follows. An utterance of 'N is F' in a speech act implicates the proposition expressed by a sentence in which the description 'the unique object named "N"' is substituted for N. On this rule we get the conventional implication of (4) that there is no unique object named 'Vulcan'.[10]

III A possible account of Gricean mechanisms for empty names

Green's arguments that there are no familiar Gricean mechanisms to account for our pragmatic implicatures of empty-names sentences fails. But what are the relevant mechanisms at work here? Here we have time for but a few brief remarks.

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10 See footnotes 4 and 8 above.

We tend to favor an account involving conversational mechanisms.[11] A possible version might combine the Grice's rules of Relation (Be relevant) and of Manner (Be brief) [Grice, 27]. Actually, Green helps us to formulate a general rule of relevance for names. He suggests that there might be a conversational rule to use 'singular terms associated with lore that is relevant to the current purpose or purposes of the conversation(s) in which you are participating' (Green, 433-434).[12]

Grice's maxim to be as brief as possible, to 'avoid unnecessary prolixity' (Grice, 27), also helps to explain empty-names implicatures in the following way. The lore associated with the name 'Santa Claus' may be quite extensive: in other words there may be many descriptions associated with the name. It is much more economical simply to say 'Santa Claus does not exist' than to say 'There is no unique person who satisfies most of the following descriptions: is fat, is jolly, owns reindeer (including Rudolf), lives at the North Pole, gives presents to kids on Christmas day, is called "Santa Claus" by many English speakers, is called "Father Christmas" by others, figures in the poem "The Night before Xmas," and so on.'[13]

Received September 2006

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11 There are a number of reasons to reject the account in terms of conventional implicature. First, it cannot account for the fact that the lore of associated descriptions may differ from group to group. Second, the description 'object referred to by "N",' which might seem to have the universality needed for a conventional association, is probably *not* part of the descriptive lore of young children. Little four-year old Carolyn understands 'Kate' (her sister), 'Barbie' (her doll), and 'Santa Claus,' although she does not have the concept of a name and of reference.

12 He credits Urmson (1968) for making a similar suggestion. Urmson's suggested maxim is: 'Use the referring expression most likely to secure successful identification by the person(s) to whom the communication is addressed' (Urmson 1968, 116; also cited in Recanti 1993, 334).

13 We very much thank Mitch Green for his paper forcing us to make clarifications and emendations to our view, in this paper. We also thank Mitch for encouragement, despite disagreement. And we thank two anonymous referees of this journal for some useful questions that led to improvements. Versions of this paper were presented at the Aitner Philosophy I conference in Athens, Summer 2006, and at the Fifth Annual Summer Interdisciplinary Conference (ASIC 2006) in Andalsnes, Norway.

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