

Tzu-Wei Hung *Editor*

Communicative Action

Selected Papers of the 2013 IEAS
Conference on Language and Action

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Tzu-Wei Hung
Institute of European and American Studies
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Preface

This book focuses on the relationship between action and language. Despite intensive debates over action and language, few studies have examined how they are related and their shared underlying mechanisms. Some researchers claim that language is a special and highly structural case of action; that sensorimotor circuits form a cortical basis for language, and that language processing can be accounted for by sensorimotor interactions. Hence, the extent to which a mechanism for processing actions also facilitates processing language is an interesting question.

This book aims to foster a conversation among interdisciplinary scholars interested in unpicking the relationship between these two significant human capacities. This book is written for readers from different academic backgrounds—from graduate students to established academics, and readers will benefit from the diverse perspectives and extensive discussions of relevant issues.

Earlier versions of the essays in this book were presented at the 2013 IEAS Conference on Language and Action, held from September 17 to September 18, in Taipei, Taiwan. For financial and administrative support, I thank the Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica (Chyong-Fang Ko, Director) and its Philosophy Group (especially Jih-Ching Ho, Wan-Chuan Fang, Norman Y. Teng, Timothy Joseph Lane). Following peer review, only some of the conference papers presented were selected for inclusion here, and I thank the referees for their work. I regret that I had to turn down several quality papers due to space limitations. Finally, I thank the editorial assistants, Yu-Tin Lin, Chih-Wei Wu, Kuei-Feng Hu, and Yi-Hsin Lai, for making this book possible.

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Part I
Language in Communication

Names, Descriptions, and Assertion

Ray Buchanan

Abstract According to Millian Descriptivism, while the semantic content of a linguistically simple proper name is just its referent, we often use sentences containing such expressions “to make assertions...that are, in part, descriptive” (Soames 2008). Against this view, I show, following Ted Sider and David Braun, that simple sentences containing names are never used to assert descriptively enriched propositions. In addition, I offer a diagnosis as to where the argument for Millian Descriptivism goes wrong. Once we appreciate the distinctive way in which this account fails, we can better appreciate the very modest role that associated descriptive information plays in the pragmatics of proper names.

According to the traditional descriptivist theory, the semantic content of a proper name is given by a definite description (or cluster of descriptive information) that speakers associate with it; the name referring to whoever, or whatever, uniquely satisfies that descriptive information. As against this view, Kripke famously argued that, (a) speakers do not typically, and need not ever, associate uniquely identifying descriptive information with the names with which they are competent and (b) even in that rare case in which a speaker does have uniquely identifying descriptive information in her possession, it still does not follow that her use of the name refers to the unique entity that satisfies that information. For these reasons, as well as equally familiar Kripkean considerations concerning the rigidity of names, few theorists these days are sympathetic to the traditional descriptivist account.

Kripke’s arguments gave rise to a widespread endorsement of Millianism—the view that the semantic contribution of a name is exhausted by its referent. But even if we agree with the Millian that the descriptive information associated with a name does not enter into the *semantic content* of an utterance containing it, this information might nevertheless play an essential role in the *pragmatics* of names. Indeed, in recent years, a number of theorists have argued in favor of a view we might call *Millian Descriptivism*—a view according to which proper names have a “Millian semantics,” but “a partially descriptive pragmatics of assertion” (Soames 2008, p 283). Moreover, these theorists have argued that their favored pragmatic theory of names helps to explain some of the most well-known problems with Millian accounts of proper names.

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In what follows, I argue that Millian Descriptivism should be rejected. More specifically, I argue that the descriptive information we associate with a proper name no more enters into what we assert by our utterances involving it, than it does the literal, compositionally determined, semantic content thereof. As we will see, once we appreciate the distinctive way in which the Millian Descriptivist account fails, we can better appreciate the very modest role that associated descriptive information plays in the pragmatics of proper names.

1 Introducing Millian Descriptivism

In *Beyond Rigidity*, and a series of important subsequent essays, Scott Soames has argued that linguistically simple names have a “Millian semantics,” but “a partially descriptive pragmatics of assertion” (Soames 2008, p. 283).¹ According to this *Millian Descriptivism*, while Millians are correct in holding the position that the semantic content of a simple name is just its referent, descriptivists are right in holding that we regularly use sentences containing such names “to make assertions, and express beliefs, that are, in part, descriptive” (Soames 2008, p. 283). Consider, for example (1)

(1) Bob Dylan is famous.

Qua *Millian Descriptivists*, these theorists hold that the sentence-type displayed in (1) semantically expresses the singular proposition (2):

(2) <Dylan, the property of being famous>

Qua *Millian Descriptivists*, however, these theorists emphasize that the semantic content of a sentence-type such as (1) will constrain, but not fully determine, what a sincere, competent speaker might *assert* by a literal utterance thereof. Rather, a speaker literally uttering (1) will oftentimes assert, and be understood as asserting, various *descriptively enriched propositions* (hereafter, “d-propositions”). More specifically, a speaker might assert—and, in so doing, intend to convey and undertake a commitment to the truth of—various d-propositions of the form displayed in (3) by uttering (1)

(3) [The x : Fx and $x = \text{Dylan}$] [Famous (x)],

¹ A “linguistically simple name” is one for which “there is little... descriptive information that a speaker must associate with the name (qua expression-type) to be a competent user of it” (Soames 2002, p. 53). Such names contrast with “partially descriptive,” complex names, like “Chief Justice Roberts,” or “Rahway, New Jersey,” which are associated with “substantial descriptive information that must be grasped by any competent speaker who understands and is able to use them correctly” (Soames 2002, p. 53). In what follows, I will only be concerned with “simple” cases. See, for example, Soames (2002, pp. 86–89) for an interesting discussion of the semantic contents of partially descriptive names. See Soames (2005) for some significant, and plausible, revisions to the account of semantic content offered in *Beyond Rigidity*.

where “F” is some, or other, contextually relevant property such as *being the guy who wrote “Blowin’ in the Wind,”* etc. The semantic content of the sentence-type (1) is nevertheless exhausted by (2), as it is the information that is *invariantly* contributed by that sentence to what one asserts in any normal, literal utterance thereof.

One of the principal selling points for Millian Descriptivism is that it seems to offer those theorists sympathetic with traditional Millian accounts of content a plausible means for responding to some of the familiar worries for their view. As the traditional Millian would be the first to emphasize, many speakers might initially be “resistant” to think that, for example, (4) and (5) have precisely the same semantic content.

(4) Bob Dylan is Bob Dylan.

(5) Bob Dylan is Robert Zimmerman.

The Millian Descriptivist can plausibly claim that when we ask ordinary speakers if two sentences of their language mean the same (i.e., have the same semantic content), they typically do *not*, as Soames puts it:

... focus on the question of whether *what is common* to that which is asserted and conveyed in all contexts involving competent speakers by utterances of the one sentence is the same as *what is common* to that which is asserted by utterances of the other sentence. Instead they focus on what *they* typically would use the sentences to assert and to convey in various contexts, or what information *they* typically would gather from assertive utterances of them (Soames 2008, p. 283).

If Soames is correct, many “anti-Millian” intuitions are not so much evidence against the traditional Millian’s claims concerning semantic content as they are actually arguments *in favor* of the Millian Descriptivist’s account of what we assert by sentences with those semantic contents, since there always remains this common core. Indeed, the Soames-inspired Millian might point to the distinction between semantic content and assertoric content in virtually *any* case in which there seems to be a felt “mismatch” between her theory’s predictions concerning the former, and ordinary, competent speakers’ judgments concerning the truth conditions of utterances with that semantic content.²

2 Assertion, Expression, and Descriptive Enrichments

When assessing Millian Descriptivism, it is important to appreciate that the proponent of this view is not merely claiming that a speaker who uses a proper name is providing evidence that she has various beliefs with d-propositions as their contents. That much should, I think, be uncontroversial. Note that in a typical communicative exchange between a speaker, S, and her audience, involving a proper name, *n*, there

² Like Jeff Speaks, I suspect that Millian Descriptivism is currently “the most popular Millian reply to Frege’s Puzzle” (2010, p. 202).

will be a numerous descriptive conditions D_1, \dots, D_n , such that it is *common ground* between them, that S associates these conditions with n .³ In such a case, when S utters a sentence of the form “ n is G” she will typically be providing her audience excellent evidence that she believes numerous d-propositions⁴:

$$\begin{aligned} & [\text{The } x : D_1x \text{ and } x = n] \quad [G(x)] \\ & [\text{The } x : D_2x \text{ and } x = n] \quad [G(x)]. \end{aligned}$$

Suppose, for example, I utter (6) in a context in which it is common ground between us that we both associate the descriptive conditions of *being the chair of the Horticulture department*, *being an enthusiast of home-brewed beer*, *being the person who ruined our couch*, and so on, with the name “Bobby Chantrelle”

(6) Bobby Chantrelle is coming to dinner.

By uttering (6), I will be giving you evidence that, among other things, I believe *that the chair of the Horticulture department, B.C., is coming to dinner*, etc. In this sense, I will be providing evidence of various beliefs of mine with d-propositions as their contents, and “weakly expressing” those d-propositions to you, even in those cases in which I do not intend to convey—much less *assert*—those propositions.

When a speaker genuinely intends to convey, and assert, some particular proposition by her utterance, her hearer must entertain that proposition if she is to successfully understand that utterance; not so for propositions that are merely weakly expressed. Unless I specifically intend to convey, say, (7) by uttering (6), you do not need to entertain that proposition in order to understand my utterance:

(7) $[\text{The } x : \text{Ruined} - \text{our} - \text{couch}(x) \text{ and } x = \text{B.C.}] \quad [\text{Coming} - \text{over} - \text{tonight}(x)]$.

Though you might reasonably infer that I believe (7) on the basis of my utterance, other facts you know of me, and the common ground, you will not have misunderstood my utterance should you fail to make that inference. Unless you take me to have intended to convey (7), your beliefs regarding the truth or falsity of (7) will be all but irrelevant to your beliefs regarding the truth conditions (and truth value) of my utterance of (6). A d-proposition that a speaker weakly expresses but does not actually intend to convey is no part of what she asserts, or what her audience who understands will take her to have asserted; it is, at best, a communicative by-product.⁵

³ Let us say that S *associates* a descriptive condition D with n just in case S would, on competent, sincere, reflection, assent to “D(n).”

⁴ Here, and in what follows, we can treat those cases in which it is common ground that n ’s being G entails (or, makes highly probable) that n does not have the relevant D-property as “atypical.”

⁵ Once we appreciate that many of the effects of a speaker’s assertion on the common ground are communicative by-product in the foregoing sense, we should resist any view on which the content of an assertion is simply read off from its “update” effects on the context of utterance. For example, any view that identifies the content of an assertion with the set of worlds compatible with the semantic content of the speaker’s utterance and the common ground between her and her audience will fail to distinguish what the speaker actually asserted, and a by-product thereof.

There are other ways of reinforcing the point that unintended d-propositions are no part of what is asserted. If, for example, I literally utter “Bob Dylan played at Woodstock,” I will be giving you good evidence that I believe that the famous rock star, Dylan, played at Woodstock; that the songwriter, Dylan, played at Woodstock, and numerous other d-propositions. But note that unless it is obvious that I have intended to convey such a d-proposition, you cannot target it for direct denial, or affirmation. For example, even if you disagree with me regarding whether Dylan is famous, wrote his own music, etc., you cannot felicitously deny or affirm the corresponding d-propositions by simply saying “No: that is wrong/false/incorrect. Dylan isn’t famous/a rock singer/etc.” Unintended, d-propositions are not typically *at-issue*, or easily available for agreement or disagreement, in the way we expect asserted content to be.

At any rate, while we can agree that speakers regularly weakly express d-propositions, admitting this much falls far short of vindicating the Millian Descriptivist claim that speakers regularly *assert* d-propositions, where this (minimally) requires both (a) *intending to convey* and (b) *intending to commit to the truth* of those propositions. In fact, Soames would agree as well, since he thinks that “for *p* to be asserted by an utterance of a sentence, it is not enough that conversational participants be in possession of information which, together with the speaker’s utterance, might, after long or careful consideration, support an inference to *p*” (2002, p. 79). Rather, he thinks, we should require that “the speaker must know and intend that his hearers will take him to be committed to *p* on the basis of his assertive utterance, and the speaker must know and intend that the hearers are in a position to recognize this intention of the speaker” (Soames 2002, p. 80). Hence, in order to assess Millian Descriptivism, we should focus on the account’s predictions in those cases in which it is obvious that conditions (a) and (b) are met. More specifically, we should ask whether in those cases in which a speaker utters a sentence containing a name intending to convey, and to commit to, a d-proposition *p*, it is plausible to claim that the speaker *asserted p*?

3 A Test Case

Let us turn then to a case in which the Millian Descriptivist will claim that a speaker asserts a particular d-proposition; a case in which the speaker manifestly intends to convey that proposition, and is recognized as having so intended. Suppose that Glenn believes that our neighbor, Freddy Morrell, is the former keyboard player of a famous 1980s band called “The Shrooms.” Further, suppose that Glenn has, on numerous occasions, told us of this, believes that we believe this too, etc. Glenn associates the descriptive condition of being the former keyboardist of The Shrooms with the name “Freddy Morrell” and thinks that I do the same. As against this conversational background, suppose that while discussing an upcoming 1980s-themed fundraiser I am hosting for a local charity, I say to Glenn “I just don’t know of any celebrities to invite that might impress the donors.” He responds by uttering (8),

(8) Freddy Morrell is in town.

In this case, Glenn clearly intends to communicate both the d-proposition in (9), and that I can, and should, invite Freddy:

(9) [The x : Former – Keyboardist – of – The – Shrooms(x) and x = F.M.]
[Is – in – town (x)].

Suppose I recognize that Glenn intends to convey both of these propositions as well as a true singular, unenriched proposition that the Millian Descriptivist would take to be the semantic content of (8). I submit that if there were ever a case in which a d-proposition is asserted by a simple sentence involving a proper name, this would be it.

As evidence in favor of the claim that Glenn asserted (9), by uttering (8), the Millian Descriptivist will point out how extremely natural and appropriate it would be for me to report what Glenn asserted or said by uttering (8), as in (10) (suppose you have just asked me if there are any local rock stars to invite to our party):

(10) Glenn asserted that the ex-keyboardist of the Shrooms, Morrell, is in town.

If we follow Soames in (a) thinking of assertion as “the most general and inclusive speech act of a set of closely related speech acts,” including *saying that p*, *stating that p*, *claiming p*, and *telling H that p*, and (b) we assume that (10) is true just in case the relevant that-clause specifies something Glenn asserted it follows from (10) that Glenn indeed asserted a d-proposition [i.e. (9)]. As the Millian Descriptivist will emphasize, a report such as (10) sounds perfectly natural and appropriate in the described scenario, and the simplest explanation of why this is so is that (10) indeed truly characterizes what Glenn asserted (Soames 2002, pp. 73–77). Hence, absent any independent, compelling motivation for thinking that the report in (10) is not true, it might seem that Glenn indeed asserted the relevant d-proposition. (More on such reports anon.)

The Millian Descriptivist will argue that cases such as the foregoing are far from anomalous—speakers *regularly* assert, and are understood as having asserted, enriched by uttering simple sentences involving names.⁶ Indeed, by her lights, it should be no more surprising that Glenn might assert (9) by uttering (8), than it is that I might assert that Mary got drunk and *then* drove home by uttering (11), or that Bill and Tom are married *to each other*, by uttering (12):

(11) Mary got drunk and drove home.

(12) Bill and Tom are married.

Once we appreciate that—quite generally—the semantic content of a speaker’s utterance need not exhaust what she asserted by making that utterance, the Millian Descriptivist’s claim that we sometimes assert d-propositions by our utterances involving names should seem considerably less surprising.

⁶ Gleakos (2011) goes so far as to say that speakers *always* assert d-propositions by literal utterances containing proper names. According to her, the ubiquity of asserting d-propositions by our utterances involving names suggests that, contra Soames (2002), such propositions are also the semantic contents of these utterances.

4 The Case Against Millian Descriptivism

The foregoing case involving Glenn's utterance of (8) illustrates that, at least sometimes, speakers indeed intend to convey d-propositions by their utterances involving names. But even in those cases in which a speaker utters a sentence containing a name intending to convey, and to commit to, a d-proposition p , is it plausible to claim that the speaker *asserted* p ?

In order to see how we might answer this question, first consider a principle I call (Assertion):

- (Assertion) If S asserts that p by uttering u , and H understands u , but believes *not- p* at the time of utterance, then H will either (a) judge S to have asserted something false by uttering u , or else (b) change her mind on whether p , provided that she recognizes the inconsistency of p and *not- p* .

Though there is considerable disagreement among theorists on how, exactly, we should best understand the speech act of assertion, the foregoing principle will be (or at least should be) accepted by all parties. Though (Assertion) might need refinements to deal with tricky cases, it should (I hope) strike you as platitudinous. Three comments concerning this principle are in order: first, if we follow Soames in thinking of assertion as “the most general and inclusive speech act of a set of closely related speech acts” including *saying that p* , *stating that p* , *claiming p* , and *telling H that p* , we should, correspondingly allow that H's judgment in (a) might take the form of “S said/stated/claimed/told me something false by uttering u ” (Soames 2002, p. 57). Second, for present purposes, we can leave condition (b) vague so as to allow that H might “change her mind” by coming to withhold belief in p (rather than come to believe p) as a result of S's assertion. Third, notice that (Assertion) should be attractive to the Millian Descriptivist; should the very minimal conditions in this principle fail, it is (at best) unclear how they could plausibly link facts about what a speaker asserts to our judgments regarding the truth conditions of utterances involving simple names in the way needed to “explain away” anti-Millian intuitions regarding semantic content.

Now with (Assertion) in mind, let us reconsider our example of Glenn's utterance of (8). Suppose the facts of the case are exactly as before except that we (Glenn's audience) both know that Freddy is *not* the ex-keyboardist of the Shrooms, and that, consequently, Glenn's belief to the contrary is actually *false*. (Imagine that though he has talked to us about this issue on many occasions, neither of us have ever had the heart to tell him that he was wrong on this score). But, as before, let us suppose that we recognize that Glenn nevertheless manifestly intends to convey (9) by uttering (8),

(8) Freddy Morrell is in town.

- (9) [The x : Former – Keyboardist – of – The – Shrooms(x) and x = F.M.]
[Is – in – town (x)].

Now, in this scenario, did Glenn assert (9) by uttering (8)? If (Assertion) is correct, no. While I fully recognize that Glenn intends to convey (9) by his utterance and actively believe the negation of that proposition, I have no inclination whatsoever to judge that Glenn asserted something false by uttering (8), nor do I change my mind on whether Freddy once played keyboards in the band, The Shrooms. Moreover, I strongly suspect that you would agree. Hence, from (Assertion) we should conclude that Glenn did not assert (9).

The foregoing case illustrates a point originally due to Braun and Sider (2006)—namely, that Kripke’s famous “semantic argument” against classical descriptivist account of proper names seems to arise for the Millian Descriptivist, as well (Kripke 1980, pp. 83–87). Even in those cases in which it is obvious that a speaker is intending to convey a false description-theoretic proposition p by an utterance containing a proper name, we do not count the falsity of p as relevant to the truth conditions of her utterance.

This fact is as much a problem for the Millian Descriptivist account of asserted content, as it is for the classical descriptivist’s account of the semantic content of such utterances.

The foregoing point is not limited to simple sentences involving names; it seems to be equally problematic for propositional attitude reports. Consider an example from Braun and Sider (2006, p. 672). Suppose that the host of a mathematics conference introduces Kurt Gödel to the audience as follows: “We are pleased to have the person who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic with us today. Prof. Gödel will speak on logic.” Further suppose that (a) Smith and Jones are late for the lecture and *only* hear the host say “Prof. Gödel will speak on logic,” and that (b) both believe—and wrongly take everyone else to believe—that Gödel is, in fact, an imposter who stole the incompleteness proof. Smith looks to Jones and whispers:

Gödel stole the incompleteness proof from Schmidt! I really doubt he’ll have the nerve to give a talk on logic. Surely he’ll talk about something else. Still, the host believes that Professor Gödel will speak on logic. (Braun and Sider 2006, p. 672)

Now consider Smith’s utterance of (13) in the foregoing dialogue:

(13) The host believes that Prof. Gödel will speak on logic.

As Braun and Sider point out, presumably the Millian Descriptivist is committed to claiming that in by uttering (13); in this scenario, Smith asserted that *the host believes that Prof. Gödel, who stole the incompleteness proof from Schmidt, will speak on logic*.⁷ But note that the falsity of this proposition notwithstanding, it is implausible that Smith asserted anything false by uttering (13). There is, as Braun and Sider put it, simply “no whiff of doubt” regarding the truth of the belief-report.

⁷ Both Braun and Sider, and Soames, only discuss cases in which the appositive clause in the relevant belief report seems to reflect an aspect of how the agent—here, the host—is thinking of the object his belief concerns. In some cases, however, the sole function of such an embedded appositive clause is to help the belief ascribers’s audience identify the object(s), or properties, that the agent’s belief concerns (as in, for example, “Billy thinks that Glenn, who I told you about two days ago, likes chocolate”). In what follows, we will only deal with cases where it is plausible that the function of the appositive is to reflect an aspect of the content of the attitude the speaker is ascribing to the subject of the report.

In his response to Braun and Sider's discussion, Soames (2006) agrees that in the case just described, we do indeed have a "strong intuition" that Smith's belief report is true. He is skeptical, however, that the case is a genuine counterexample to the Millian Descriptivist position. According to Soames, speakers who use proper names in belief-reports, or elsewhere, typically assert numerous descriptively enriched propositions. In the case of (13), Soames claims that it is plausible that Smith asserted each of the following propositions, as well as "a number of related propositions" (Soames 2006, pp. 719–720),

The host believed that the day's guest, Gödel, would speak on logic.

The host believed that the person, Gödel, he was introducing would speak on logic.

The host believed that the man, Gödel, standing with him on stage would speak on logic.

The host believed that the logician, Gödel, would speak on logic.

The host believed that the well-known, Professor Gödel, would speak on logic.

In the case of (13), Soames claims that this "wealth of obvious enrichments produces an avalanche of truths" (Soames 2006, pp. 719–720). On the basis of this observation, Soames offers the following response to Braun and Sider:

First, in considering what someone said we often focus on subpart of the whole of what was asserted: hence it is possible that this avalanche [of true d-propositions in the case of (13)] might mask the assertion of something false. Second, and I believe more significant for this example, our decisions about what descriptive enrichments should be credited to a speaker in determining his assertions may be guided, in part, by considerations of charity... when there are several obvious, relatively simple and straightforward truths the assertion of which may be credited to a speaker's remark, we may resist adding what we know to be a clear falsehood to the list, unless something about the discourse, or broader context of utterance, makes the addition unavoidable. (2006, p. 720; bracketed material mine)

Unfortunately, I do not think either of these considerations ultimately helps the Millian Descriptivist evade Braun and Sider's worry.

First, I doubt that our anti-Millian Descriptivist intuitions can always be explained by citing an "avalanche" of true asserted enrichments masking the presence of the problematic false enrichment. Suppose that you are in an unfamiliar neighborhood, and you approach a stranger, Tim, and ask whether there are any mechanics nearby. Tim responds by uttering (14),

(14) Tug McGee lives on Elmwood Drive.

Now, in this situation, we can stipulate that Tim only intends to convey a singular proposition concerning Tug, to the effect that *he* lives on Elmwood Drive, and the corresponding d-proposition containing an enrichment of that singular proposition with the property of being a mechanic. In this case, there is no avalanche of true d-propositions to appeal to in this case. Nevertheless, I submit that here, as before, we would judge that even if Tug is not a car mechanic, Tim did not assert or claim or tell you something false by uttering (14). No doubt, if Tim knows that Tug is not a mechanic he will be blameworthy for having intentionally misled you, but this need not be because he *asserted* the false enriched proposition—even a speaker who knowingly conversationally implicates a false proposition is guilty for having misled (more on this in a bit). Indeed, in some cases, a speaker can even be held responsible for weakly expressing a proposition he believes to be false.

Second, it is unclear (to me, at any rate) what Soames could have in mind by “the discourse, or broader context of utterance” making an enrichment “unavoidable” such that it is of help with regard to either the case of Glenn’s utterance of (8), or Smith’s utterance of (13). After all, in each of these cases it is obvious to both the speaker, and her audience, that she intends to convey, and intends to commit to, the truth of the relevant (false) enriched proposition. In the case of (8), for example, we can simply *stipulate* that it is mutually obvious to both of us and Glenn and that his utterance of (8) is an informative, relevant, answer to my query concerning who we should invite to the fundraiser on the condition that he intended to convey (9) thereby. Even though the relevant, false d-proposition is seemingly “unavoidable” in such a case, the problem remains—we do not judge Glenn to have asserted *anything* false, even though the relevant d-proposition [(9)] is false.

Third, I am doubtful that considerations of charity are of much help here. For the sake of argument, let us assume that, other things being equal, we invariably seek to minimize the number of obvious falsehoods that we take speakers to have actually asserted. For that matter, suppose that we *never* take speakers as having asserted enriched propositions that are obviously false. Even if we are charitable in this very thoroughgoing way, we can simply restate Braun and Sider’s worry counterfactually: pick any case you like in which you successfully recognize that a speaker utters a sentence of the form in (15) intending to convey both a proposition concerning the referent of “*n*” to the effect that *it* is *G*, as well as some, or other, *true* d-proposition [The *x*: *Dx* and *x=n*] [*G(x)*]:

(15) *n* is *G*.

Now ask yourself whether it is plausible that the speaker would have asserted or claimed, etc. something false by uttering (14) *were* it to turn out that though the referent of “*n*” is *G*, it is not *D*. I submit that it is not. But since this counterfactual judgment does not itself require our taking the speaker to have asserted anything obviously false by her utterance of (15), it is doubtful the problem for the Millian Descriptivist can be explained by appeal to charity.⁸

Pending some alternative response to Braun and Sider’s observation, I submit that we should reject Millian Descriptivism.

5 Descriptive Enrichment and the Pragmatics of Proper Names

Let us take inventory. The Millian Descriptivist claims that “we often *use* sentences containing (linguistically simple names) to make assertions, and express beliefs, that are, in part, descriptive” (Soames 2008, p. 283). We can agree with the Millian Descriptivist that, in some sense, we regularly “*express beliefs* that are, in part

⁸ Alternatively, we could just ask whether the speaker asserted anything that *entails* that the referent of “*n*” is *D*, as well, so as to completely avoid the issue of the truth or falsity of the relevant enrichment.

descriptive” (*italics mine*) by using simple names. In virtually any use of a name we “weakly express” numerous such beliefs; and, sometimes, we even intend to convey, and are recognized as having intended to convey, beliefs with d-contents. The Millian Descriptivist is, however, mistaken in claiming that by using names in this way, we make *assertions* that are, in part, descriptive. As we have seen, even in those cases most congenial to the Millian Descriptivist—cases in which the speaker clearly intends to convey a d-proposition—it is implausible to claim that a descriptively enriched proposition was asserted.

But if Millian Descriptivism is false, then (a) what *do* we assert by our utterances of simple sentences involving names and (b) what is the status of the d-propositions in cases such as Glenn’s utterance of (8); that is, cases in which the speaker manifestly intends to convey a d-proposition? Since I suspect that my favored answers to these questions will be somewhat unsurprising in light of the foregoing critical discussion of the Millian Descriptivist, I will be brief.

Setting aside the very special case of empty names, I am sympathetic to the view that when a speaker literally utters a simple sentence of the form “*n* is *G*” what she asserts—and all that she asserts—is a singular, Millian proposition concerning the referent of “*n*” to the effect that *it* is *G*.⁹ For example, returning to our original example concerning (1), I hold that the content of the act of assertion is the singular proposition in (2),

(1) Bob Dylan is famous.

(2) <Dylan, the property of being famous>

Of course, a speaker who literally utters (1) in order to assert (2) might also *conversationally implicate* numerous other propositions thereby. Indeed, in each of the cases we have discussed in which the speaker clearly intends to convey a d-proposition ((8), (13), and (14)), the relevant enrichment is plausibly part of what the speaker implicates *by* asserting a singular proposition in the specific manner she did.¹⁰ But while a descriptively enriched proposition might be among the things a speaker intends to communicate by her utterance involving a name, such a proposition will nevertheless be (at best) something she indirectly means, and suggests, by asserting what she did—a proposition that her audience will take her to have meant by her utterance if they are to preserve the presumption that she was being conversationally cooperative. For example, Glenn’s utterance of (8) constitutes an informative, cooperative response to the question under discussion in part, because he meant the d-proposition (9). One very pleasing consequence of this diagnosis is that we should expect that our evaluation of the truth, or falsity, of a speaker-meant d-proposition will be all but irrelevant to our evaluation of the truth conditions of

⁹ I am sympathetic to the proposal of Braun (1993) on which both the semantic content of an utterance containing a nonreferring proper names is “gappy proposition.” See Buchanan (2010, 2013, for an attempt to make sense of gappy propositions as the contents of our assertions.

¹⁰ I take each of these cases to crucially involve both the maxim of manner and the maxim of relevance.

what the speaker asserted by the relevant utterance. That is, we should expect the results from Section 4 that looked so problematic for the Millian Descriptivist.

In short, I am sympathetic to the traditional view according to which the things we assert by literal utterances of simple sentences involving proper names are singular, Millian Propositions, allowing that sometimes we might also conversationally implicate any number of other propositions—including, in some cases, descriptive enrichments—by such utterances.

In endorsing this “old school” variety of Millianism, I do not mean to suggest that the descriptive information we associate with names might not play some more limited, modest role in the pragmatics of names. Perhaps it does. Note that in virtually any case in which a speaker literally uses a proper name “*n*,” she will intend for her audience to infer who, or what, she is referring to (in part) by trying to find some object in the common ground that bears that name. But in those cases in which there is more than one object in the common ground that bears the relevant name, she might have to rely on her audience having *further* information—including shared descriptive information associated with the “*n*”—in their wherewithal which will help put them into a position to infer which so-called thing she is intending to refer to. This point should be intuitive—think of what justifies you in expecting that your audience will take you as referring to one bearer of, say, the name “Bob” rather than another, in a particular context of utterance. If I utter “Bob is playing a show tonight,” you might come to recognize which bearer of that name I am referring to—say, Bob Dylan—at least in part as a result of your knowing that it is common ground between us that a certain bearer of the name “Bob” has *the property of being a famous singer or songwriter*. Here, as before, this descriptive information is *not* plausibly part of what I assert by uttering “Bob is playing a show tonight” (note, e.g., I will not have asserted something false should it turn out that Dylan did not write his own songs). Rather, it is merely information that I intend for my audience to rely on in coming to correctly identify what it is that I asserted.

Earlier we saw that the descriptive information we associate with a proper name (or take others to associate with it) might sometimes enter into the propositions that we “weakly express,” or conversationally implicate, by utterances of simple sentences containing it. In light of the preceding paragraph, we can add that such associated descriptive information might also sometimes figure in the information we intend our audiences to use in inferring what we have asserted by our utterance involving the relevant name. Crucially, however, that information it is never part of what we *assert* by such utterances.

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