

Strawson, *On Referring* – Differences in Referring

- (1) They differ in the extent to which the reference they are used to make is dependent on the context of their utterance. Words like “I” and “it” stand at one end of this scale—the end of maximum dependence—and phrases like “the author of *Waverley*” and “the eighteenth king of France” at the other. (338)

- (2) They differ in the degree of “descriptive meaning” they possess: by “descriptive meaning” I intend “conventional limitation, in application, to things of a certain general kind, or possessing certain general characteristics”. At one end of this scale stand the proper names we most commonly use in ordinary discourse; men, dogs and motor-bicycles may be called “Horace”. The pure name has no descriptive meaning (except such as it may acquire *as a result of* some one of its uses as a name). A word like “he” has minimal descriptive meaning, but has some. Substantival phrases like “the round table” have the maximum descriptive meaning. An interesting intermediate position is occupied by ‘impure’ proper names like “The Round Table”—substantival phrases which have grown capital letters. (338)

- (3) Finally, they may be divided into the following two classes: (i) those of which the correct referring use is regulated by some *general* referring-cum-ascriptive conventions. To this class belong both pronouns, which have the least descriptive meaning, and substantival phrases which have the most; (ii) those of which the correct referring use is regulated by no general conventions, either of the contextual or the ascriptive kind, but by conventions which are *ad hoc* for each particular use (though not for each particular utterance). Roughly speaking, the most familiar kind of proper names belong to this class. Ignorance of a man’s name is not ignorance of the language. This is why we do not speak of the meaning of proper names. (But it won’t do to say they are meaningless.) Again an intermediate position is occupied by such phrases as “The Old Pretender”. Only an old pretender may be so referred to; but to know which old pretender is not to know a general, but an *ad hoc*, convention. (338, 339)