

Description without descriptive content? Morpho-syntactic evidence from Chinese against Descriptivism

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One of the core issues among the discussion of proper names, be it in a linguistic or a philosophical sense, is whether proper names have descriptive content. While the Millianism holds the view that proper names refer directly, the Descriptivism treats them as NPs with descriptive content. This paper presents morpho-syntactic evidences in Chinese against Descriptivism by investigating the distribution of proper names in existential sentences and the word order in appositive construction.

Existential sentence is usually regarded as a construction with definiteness restriction on the “pivot” nominal. Proper names are therefore incompatible with it. To avoid the anaphoric use and the list use of existential sentences, we focus in this paper on sentences like (1). While the name of a famous person is generally accepted, the name of an average person is not acceptable. This differential acceptance thus prevents us from seeing the information “the individual called N” as the semantics of a proper name N.

- (1) *Congqian you (yi) ge guowang/Zhuge Liang/*Zhang San.*
in-the-past exist one CLF king/Zhuge Liang/Zhang San
'Once upon a time there was a king/Zhuge Liang/*Zhang San.'

The word order in appositive constructions also brings evidence for Millianism to light. There are 4 NP-types which can combine with each other to produce an appositive construction: 1) pronoun, 2) bare noun, 3) proper name and 4) demonstrative phrase. Whenever the last three were chosen, the word order in 2)-3)-4) is fixed, which is explained by Deng (2018) in term of informativity. Since this word order is insensitive to the personal popularity, the characteristic of a person therefore should not be regarded as the semantics of the name that person is called.

With the two morpho-syntactic phenomena in view, we draw the conclusion that proper names in Chinese are direct-referential without descriptive content. In addition, we explain the differential morpho-syntactic behavior between proper names in Chinese and in German/English by taking notice of the different grammaticalization-level of indefinite article.

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