How do Names Work?

It might seem strange to ask how names get their meaning; it seems obvious that the names 'Peter' or 'pen', for example, just do pick out certain things in the world … but TOK is about looking at things that we think are obvious and trying to figure out how reliable they are or how they really work. So, how do we know that a name actually refers to a certain thing (or set of things) in the world and how exactly does it 'bite on to' that thing so that it is possible for us to know what objects someone is talking about when they use a give word, like 'pen' or for us to say that someone else is using the name 'Peter' correctly or incorrectly?

When asking how names get their meaning it is important to be aware that there are at least eight different ways in which we use the word 'meaning', these are:

1. *Indication.* "These black clouds mean rain."
2. *Cause.* "What do these footprints in the sand mean?"
3. *Intention.* "I meant to stay home and study."
4. *Explanation.* "What does this phrase in *Finnegans Wake* mean?"
5. *Purpose.* "Violence by terrorists is meaningless."
6. *Implication.* "If it rains, that means we won't go."
7. *Significance.* "Does human life have any meaning?"

However, none of these definitions is really what we are interested in. We want to know how a given name / word *refers* to a set of objects in the world. *Reference,* the eighth way in which the word meaning can be used, is how language 'bites on to the world' … but before we can think about how reference works we need to first think about what exactly a name is and to do this it will be helpful to look at two problems with naming to see what they can tell us about exactly what kind of thing names are.

Problem #1: Denying Existence

The first problem is caused when you say something like 'There is no such thing as the Loch Ness monster or Santa Claus'. Since you must refer to it or think about it in order to deny it, does it not then in some way become a thing? Meinong argued that if we say there is no such thing as a golden mountain, then there is something to which we do refer. One can even make true or false statements regarding this thing; for example, it would be true to say that "it" is golden and false that "it" is silver. But how untidy it would be to clutter up the universe with so many objects!

Problem #2: Referential Opacity

A second problem is *referential opacity.* There are certain situations when you cannot substitute one name for another name, or one description for another description, even though you would think that you should be able to because they refer to the same thing. Here is an example where propositions 1 and 2 are true, but 3 is false:

1. Oedipus wanted to marry Jocasta.
2. Jocasta was Oedipus' mother.
3. Oedipus wanted to marry his mother.

Here, error or confusion results from substitution of one term for another even though both have the same reference. Because they refer to the same thing it seems like we should be able to just swap the words around, after all we can do this in maths, for example we can replace every 4 in every equation with (2x2) without any problems, so why can't we do it here?

The answer to these problems reveals something important about names, and this is that there is a big difference between a name and a description: in the sentence 'the planet Venus is the brightest object in the night sky' the description is the 'brightest object in the night sky' bit. Note, that the description may not always pick out the same thing. For example if a bright comet happened to be passing one night, or there was a supernova or a shooting star, those things would be, for that night, the brightest thing in the night sky.

Not only does a description not always pick out the same thing in the world, descriptions can also be used to talk about things even when we don't actually know what it is that we want to pick out – e.g. in the question 'What is the brightest thing in the night sky?' Clearly this sentence makes sense and has meaning even though the person asking it doesn't actually know the object he is referring to (if he did, he wouldn't have to ask the question).

However, the description part of the sentence is very different to the name part, 'Venus', which is the other part of the sentence. The word Venus can never pick out a different object: the passing comet will not suddenly be called 'Venus' because it happens to be the brightest object in the night sky on one particular night. Note, this difference between the naming part and the descriptive part is roughly similar to the difference between the connotation of a word (the descriptive part) and the denotation of a word (the thing that the word actually picks out).

So, to go back to the first problem, the phrase 'the Golden Mountain' or 'Santa Claus' is not actually a name but a kind of description that doesn't really stand for anything. These words look like names, but are not, for example: "The present Queen of England" and "the present Queen of France" look like the same kind of sentence; nevertheless, the first is a name because it picks out a specific person while the second does not (because France is a Republic without a royal family). If you would like to have a great-grandchild named "Bert," you may indeed reserve that *word,* you might even talk about your '*grandchild Bert'* to other people*,* but it does not *name* anything until the child is born.

In the case of the second problem we have again been misled by something that looks like a name but is not. Both Oedipus and Jocasta really are names but the phrase 'Oedipus' mother' is actually not a name at all but rather a property that the woman named Jocasta happens to have had, so the problem was caused by us trying to swap a name for a property, which you can't do because they are not the same kind of thing. A slightly different problem is created by the fact that in the second example Oedipus doesn't *know* that Jocasta is his mother and so not only do we have to be careful to differentiate names from properties but we also need to be careful when dealing with mental states or beliefs.

So the key thing, it seems, is to remember that a name is something very different to a description, a property, or a belief about something … and now we have a better idea of what a name is, we are in a position to answer the question of how names get their meanings. As usual in philosophy, there are a number of competing theories.

Answer #1: Objectivist Theories

One answer to the question of how names work comes from a group of philosophers (the logical positivists or objectivists) who claim that the meaning of a name is just the actions that you do in response to the named thing: e.g. how you might use it, what you would have to do to see it or what things you could observe that would prove a statement containing that name true / false. The advantage of this is that if a name is an idea in your head then it is something strange, private and inaccessible to other people whereas actions are out in the world for everyone to see … so, the reasoning is that if meanings are brought outside of the head and into the public world of actions then that would help clear everything up.

However, the attempt to reduce the meaning of a word to actions related to it is unconvincing. Just as meanings are not the same things as words, so meanings are not the same things as actions or uses and worse still, for those who believe that the meaning of a word is related to what would prove it true, there is no way to prove some kinds of meanings either true or false, such as those concerning the remote past ("It snowed in Manhattan on January 6, 1092" - there are no records), or the remote future ("Stars will continue to shine after all life is extinct" - who will do the verifying?) However, these sentences clearly do still have a meaning even though they can't be proven and so the meaning of a word can not simply just be a set of actions, observations or statements about when it would be true or false.

Answer #2: Descriptivist Theories

A second account, this one put forward most famously by Bertrand Russell, states that a name is basically a short hand abbreviation for a long list of different qualities that describe something. So the name Christopher Columbus means:

1. the man who sailed to America in 1492
2. the man who was born on May 20th 1451
3. the captain of the three ships the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria
4. …

Now this theory makes good intuitive sense and seems to fit well with the way that we would answer the question 'Who is Christopher Columbus?' as our answer would probably be something like 'Well, Christopher Columbus is the man who sailed to America in 1492 and …' So that seems to work.

However, there are problems with this account as it seems possible to refer to someone even though we might have the wrong description of them. For instance, many people mistakenly believe that Columbus was the first European to discover America when in fact he was actually beaten there by Bjarni Herjolfsson from Norway who first sighted mainland America 500 years earlier in 986. So in this case the description that these people have in their heads would include the factually incorrect first line:

1. the man who discovered America
2. the man who was born …

However, even though these people have got the wrong description it seems that we wouldn't say that when they talk about Christopher Columbus they have failed to refer to the man that we mean about when we talk about him. It seems instead that we would say that they have referred to Christopher Columbus but that they have just got some of the description or the facts about him wrong … and if that is the case then naming / referring must be more than just a description or set of facts about a thing because if a name was just a description there would be no way to get the description wrong but still refer to the same thing as everyone else. So it seems that, although this theory makes good intuitive sense, it can't really be how names work.

Answer #3: Causal Theories

One final alternative theory which has become popular in the last twenty to thirty years is the causal one. In Genesis 2:19-20 God asks Adam to name all of the animals in the Garden of Eden and he did this by pointing at each animal and calling out their name. As such, one obvious answer to how names work is that they are related back to an original 'act of naming'– e.g. like Adam pointing at all the animals in the Garden. Thus using a name correctly would mean using it in the same way that Adam did by having some kind of continuous causal link between his act of naming and your use of the name.

This theory also makes good sense and, although it seems a little strange to think that some one specific person actually had to come up with names for everyday objects like 'pens', 'carrots' and 'calendars', it becomes more plausible when we actually see this in action when new words come into existence, e.g. when Tim Berners-Lee coined the term 'World Wide Web' in 1990. It also fits with the one act of naming that pretty much everyone will get an opportunity to do at one point in their life: that of naming a child. In all of the above cases we generally say that someone is using the name correctly when they use it in the same way as the original namer. So in order for me to use the phrase 'World Wide Web' correctly I have to use it to point at the same (kind of) thing that Tim Berners-Lee was pointing at in 1990 when he used the word for the first time.

This theory, put forward by the linguists Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam among others, is currently the most widely accepted account of naming in modern philosophy however, the idea of having some kind of thread of meaning linking us all the way back to a first namer has at least three problems. Firstly, exactly what is the nature of the connection that is supposed to link my use of a name back to the original namer and secondly how do we account for the fact that words do not always seem to come from an original user because language is a communal thing that is agreed on as a group rather than dictated by one 'first namer'.

The third problem is encapsulated by this an anecdote from Ogden and Richards' Meaning of Meaning: a visitor in a savage tribe wanted on one occasion "the word for table. There were five or six boys standing around, and, tapping the table with my forefinger I asked 'What is this?' One boy said it was dodela, another that it was an etanda, a third stated that it wasbokali, a fourth that it was elamba, and the fifth said it was meza." After congratulating himself on the richness of the vocabulary of the language the visitor found later "that one boy had thought he wanted the word for tapping; another for the material of which the table was made; another . . . the word for hardness; another . . . the name for that which covered the table; and the last gave us the word meza, table."

So, in conclusion, there is as yet no firmly accepted explanation for how words get their meanings and how names 'bite on to the world'. The problems of reference and naming are still a philosophical topic for discussion and so, as a TOK student, it is important to be aware that the sometimes even the simple things that we take for granted, such as names, are not as straightforward as we would imagine.

Adapted from Reuben Abel's 'Man is the Measure' (Chapter 7)