

Research project: *Meaning and Time*

Jaakko Reinikainen PhD

Tampere University, Finland

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Overview

The research project *Meaning and Time* pursues a metasemantic theory with the following major aims:

- (1) Defend and develop the pure causal-historical theory of reference inaugurated by Saul Kripke (1980), and
- (2) Show that the pure causal-historical theory offers the best non-straight solution to Kripke's Wittgenstein's (1982) sceptical challenge about meaning and rule-following.

The subgoals of *Meaning and Time* are as follows:

- (1a) Provide a comprehensive pure causal-historical theory of reference fixing,
- (1b) provide a pure causal-historical theory of reference borrowing,
- (2a) show that the so-called "problem of finitude" is the sole major problem of Kripkenstein's sceptical challenge,
- (2b) prove that there is no so-called "straight" solution available to the problem of finitude,
- (2c) show how the theory described in (1) can provide a non-straight solution to the problem of finitude, and
- (2d) show how the theory described in (1) provides the best such solution out of currently available options.

Explanation

In the wake of Kripke's pioneering insights in *Naming and Necessity*, the causal-historical approach to meaning and reference has gained some popularity up to the present day, especially thanks to efforts of authors such as by Michael Devitt (1981), Mario Gómez-Torrente (2019), Andrea Bianchi (2015), Panu Raatikainen (2020), and François Recanati (2012) among others. Despite these efforts, certain key research problems persist in the literature, primary among these being exactly how reference is "fixed" and how it can be "borrowed". Briefly, reference fixing means the fact in virtue of which a given word type attaches itself for the first time in the use of a speaker to its semantic referent. Although it is widely agreed that ostension and a causal contact with the referent must play an important role at least for a great many words, the exact answer has proved elusive due to the so-called *qua*-problem (Devitt and Sterelny 1999). In nutshell, if reference fixing is a causal relation, since causal relations in general are in many ways underdetermined, how can words have such determined references as they apparently do?

While issues related to reference fixing have garnered the majority of attention in the causal-historical literature, much less focus has been given to the equally important Kripkean idea of reference borrowing. Briefly, borrowing means the hearer's ability to inherit the reference of a word type she gathers from the speaker's use of that word despite possibly being ignorant of or in error about what the referent is, or even if it exists. Indeed, attention to

the phenomenon of reference borrowing is what in my view most distinguishes the causal-historical approach from other semantic externalist theories available in the literature.

The aim of the “pure” causal-historical theory is to explain both reference fixing and borrowing as far as possible without relying on an independently understood notion of conceptual, propositional, descriptive content available to the speakers, which is posited as a solution to the aforementioned problems by the various hybrid versions of the causal-historical approach. I have already provided the framework for a solution to (1a) in my (2024a) and am currently working on a solution for (1b).

The second half of the *Meaning and Time* research project concerns Kripkenstein’s sceptical challenge which I have argued to be of central importance to metasemantics (Reinikainen 2024b, Part 1). The received view in the literature is that the major argument of the sceptical challenge (which states, roughly, that no word can have determinate meaning, or that there are no facts about meaning) has to do with the claim that meaning is, in some sense, normative. I contest this reading, claiming that normativity does not represent the crucial argumentative pivot of the sceptic. Rather, the sceptical argument turns on the problem of finitude. Roughly, the problem of finitude states that since facts about meaning have to be able to determine an infinite number of possible applications of the word as either correct or incorrect, and because the only candidate facts we have to determine meanings are finite (namely, facts about actual speakers), there can be no facts about meaning in the sense of “meaning” which is standardly assumed in philosophical discussions.

My positive proposal here is to show that the sceptic is right in claiming that the standard view of meaning is, in fact, impossible. What this entails is that we need a novel outlook about meaning, i.e. a metasemantic theory which is able to account for the fundamental finitude, historicity of meaning. This is just what the causal-historical account, especially in the pure version, is in my view able to provide, as I tentatively argue in my (2023).

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