Some Remarks on the Mill-Frege Theory of Names

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ABSTRACT: In a recent paper García-Carpintero (2017) argues that proper names possess, in addition to their standard referential truth conditional content, metalinguistic descriptive senses which take part in semantic presuppositions. The aim of this article is twofold. In the first part I present an argument against García-Carpintero's presuppositional view, which I call the collapse argument. In short, I argue that the view has the unwelcome consequence of making contexts of use and *felicitous* contexts of use collapse. If this is correct, a presuppositional account of the metalinguistic descriptions allegedly associated with proper names proves incorrect. In the second part I sketch an alternative Millian strategy which is able to account for the evidence which allegedly supports the presuppositional view.

KEYWORDS: Pragmatics – presupposition – proper names – semantics.

1. The Mill-Frege theory of proper names

In order to understand García-Carpintero's theory (The Mill-Frege Theory of proper names) it is convenient to start by pointing at a number of assumptions on which such theory rests. The first one is the Kaplanian distinction between generic and specific names. A generic name consist just

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in a phonological or orthographical articulation, i.e. a pattern of sounds or ink-marks. Specific names, in turn, are individuated by an historical event, to wit, the act of naming by means of which the name was created (I'll say a little bit more about acts of naming below). Crucially, for García-Carpintero names that occur bare in argument position are *specific* names, not generic ones. The second assumption is Properism, roughly the view that all the objects named *John* possess different specific names, say $John_1$, $John_2$, $John_3$…, which share the same phonological and orthographical articulation.[2] Finally, García-Carpintero adopts a way of understanding the semantics/pragmatics divide according to which the semantic dimension is not restricted to the truth conditional realm but it comprehends "any meaning feature belonging to a type constitutive of the nature of languages (so that any attempt at characterizing a possible language having any chance of being the actual language of a population which overlooks that type of feature is thereby inadequate)…" (García-Carpintero 2000, 112).

With this in mind, let's now summarize the main points of the Mill-Frege view. First, the view is token-reflexive: concrete referents are ascribed to name-tokens, namely concrete actual or possible uses of expressions, as opposed to the more standard Kaplanian occurrences (cf. García-Carpintero 1998; 2000 for a discussion of the token-reflexive view). Second, the view is Millian in the following sense: it grants that the only truth conditional contribution of a name-token to the utterance of which it takes part is its referent. Thus, unlike some forms of descriptivism, the Mill-Frege theory does not claim that names are *synonymous* with definite descriptions, metalinguistic or otherwise. Still, proper names are *semantically* associated with descriptive metalinguistic senses, which figure in semantic presuppositions triggered by tokens of them. What takes us to the third point: the Mill-Frege theory maintains that a token **n** of a specific proper name N_i carries a semantic presupposition of the form 'x is the unique individual picked out in the act of naming instituting the N_i-appellative practice to which **n** belongs' (García-Carpintero 2017, 26). This presupposition is an instance of a schematic rule, which is said to be part of the linguistic knowledge of any competent speaker, of the form

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2   The view contrasts with Commonerism, viz. the position that all Johns share the same name.

N_i = For any use n of proper name N_i, n refers to x if and only if x is the unique individual picked out in the act of naming instituting the N_i-appellative practice to which n belongs. (García-Carpintero 2017, 26)

García-Carpintero adopts a Stalnakerian view on presuppositions. Very roughly, on this view an utterance presupposes a proposition p if it is inappropriate unless p belongs to the common ground, that is, to the set of propositions commonly accepted by the conversational partners (otherwise it has to be accommodated by the audience). Stalnaker's view is considered a pragmatic view, usually opposed to the semantic, Strawsonian view on presuppositions. According to García-Carpintero, however, Stalnaker's approach is compatible with the existence of some presuppositions being semantic in the traditional sense (cf. García-Carpintero 2000 and 2016). Very roughly, an utterance (semantically) presupposes a proposition p if (i) the truth of p is required for the utterance to have a truth value and (ii) the presupposition is triggered by the conventional meaning of some expression in the sentence. On the Mill-Frege view presuppositions associated with proper names are semantic in exactly that sense: they are triggered by the conventional meaning of the name and their truth is required for the name to refer, hence for the utterance to possess a truth value.

We already said in which sense the theory is Millian. The last paragraph makes it clear in which sense it is Fregean: on the one hand, the view contends that names are *semantically* associated with descriptive senses, which are part of the linguistic knowledge shared by competent speakers; on the other hand, the view has it that descriptive senses *fix the reference*, i.e. they figure in semantic presuppositions the truth of which is required for the name to refer, thus for the utterance to have a truth value.

Let me end this brief summary by saying a few words on *acts of naming*. On the Mill-Frege theory acts of naming are 'purposeful events, instituting linguistic conventions, appellative practices' (García-Carpintero 2017, 16), thereby creating a new *specific* name and fixing a referent for it. Acts of naming can be explicit or implicit. In the former case, they constitute a directive speech act, a plea or request to create a new expression, i.e. to conventionally associate a given object with a generic name (a phonological or orthographical articulation) and to conform future practice to that convention. In the latter case the name comes into existence just by being

presumed to exist, provided that the community goes along with that presumption. Finally, acts of naming can be successful or not. When they are, a new *specific* name comes into existence, and the relevant object becomes the semantic referent of that name.

These are the main theses of the Mill-Frege theory. With these in mind I will discuss, in the next section, what I think is the main problem for this presuppositional approach to proper names.

2. The collapse argument

In line with the tradition (Karttunen 1974, Stalnaker 1974) we can think of presuppositions as restrictions on appropriate or felicitous contexts of use. Put differently, presuppositions restrict the contexts in which a sentence can be felicitously used to those in which the presupposition is satisfied: in the case of pragmatic presuppositions felicitous contexts are those in which the presupposition is part of the common ground; in the case of semantic presuppositions, felicitous contexts are those in which the presupposition is true. Thus, whenever an expression triggers a presupposition there is a set of contexts, viz. the ones in which the presupposition fails, in which using the expression would be inappropriate. By way of illustration, consider a presupposition typically thought of as semantic in nature, like the existence presupposition in

(1)   The king of France is bald.

If I use (1) and there is no king of France, I have used the expression infelicitously. As a consequence, the story goes, the description does not denote and the utterance lacks a truth value. Something analogous can be said for the case of indexicals, at least on a presuppositional account (García-Carpintero 2000). On this view, these expressions possess a relational property involving any use, which is mutually known by hearer and speaker on the basis of linguistic knowledge alone, it is reasonably individuative and fixes the reference of the expression in a context. As in the case of proper names, this property is said to be part of a semantic presupposition associated with the expression. In the case of demonstratives, the presuppositional rule goes as follows:

That = For any use that of *that*, that refers to *x* if and only if *x* is the unique entity (in a contextually specified class *F*) 'demonstrated' when that is produced. (García-Carpintero 2017, 10)

Here, again, if I use *that* without there being a unique entity demonstrated in the context I have used the expression inappropriately, and as a consequence my token does not refer and the utterance lacks a truth value.

If names trigger semantic presuppositions we expect the same behaviour: there should be some contexts in which I use a name but, since the presupposition is not satisfied, my use is infelicitous thus the name fails to refer and the utterance lacks a truth value.[3] However, there is a key difference between the case of definite descriptions and demonstratives and that of proper names. According to García-Carpintero 'each instance of N_i is a rule associated with a *specific* proper name: a word individuated by its linguistic features, *in particular the semantic one constituted by the act of naming which fixes its reference*' (García-Carpintero 2017, 26, my emphasis). Moreover, on the Mill-Frege theory of names, whether a given token **n** is a token of a certain specific name, N_i, is also determined by its linguistic features, in particular by the fact that it exploits the N_i-appellative practice instituted by a certain concrete historical act of naming which fixed its reference. Put differently, the property of being related with this or that original act of naming or appellative practice is individuative of the specific name N_i and tokens of it.

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[3] At this point a clarification is needed. We expect the same behaviour from definite descriptions, demonstratives and proper names only as long as we assume (following García-Carpintero) that the three kinds of expressions carry a semantic presupposition. On that assumption, we expect presupposition failure to lead to an infelicitous use in the three cases. Now, although it is standard to associate a semantic presupposition to definite descriptions, it is less standard to do so in the case of demonstratives and proper names. Here, for the sake of the argument, I follow García-Carpintero in granting the existence of a semantic presupposition in the three cases in order to show, in the end, that proper names behave different both from (i) expressions commonly thought to carry a semantic presupposition, like definite descriptions and (ii) expressions not so commonly thought to carry a semantic presupposition, but which García-Carpintero himself would classify as involving semantic presuppositions, like demonstratives. Thanks to a reviewer for *Organon F* for signaling this point.

This point is clear on García-Carpintero discussion of Madagascar-like cases (García-Carpintero 2017, 18-20). There, he explicitly sides with Sainsbury (2005), and against Sainsbury (2015), in claiming that in Madagascar-like cases there is no change of reference of the same specific name, but the creation of a new appellative practice, hence of a new specific name. In other words, he rejects Sainsbury's (2015) claim that the historical chain that determines the same-name relation and that which determines the same-referent relation are different. In turn, he contends that

> this ignores a semantic constitutive role that the previous considerations show acts of naming to have. In a nutshell: they are intended to introduce a word; words are individuated in part by their semantic features; names, like indexicals, are *de jure* constitutively referential expressions, whose semantic referent is determined relative to what transpired at a particular act of naming. (García-Carpintero 2017, 20)

This raises a problem. If acts of naming and appellative practices are individuative of specific proper names and in addition, they are part of their presuppositional content, then presupposition failure, i.e. a token **n** not being associated with any act of naming/appellative practice, does not merely prevents the speaker from using the name felicitously but *it prevents her from using a specific name at all*, since the fact mentioned in the alleged presupposition is the fact which crucially determines whether such token is indeed a token of a specific name. To be sure, this is not the case for demonstratives in García-Carpintero's account: presuppositions associated with demonstratives play a role in fixing the reference, but they do not play any role in the individuation of the expression. The fact that there is a unique individual being demonstrated in the context is not part of the facts which determine whether the expression being used is this or that demonstrative. That's why, if such presupposition fails you have nonetheless used the demonstrative in question, although inappropriately. Something analogous can be said about the case of definite descriptions. There being a king of France plays no role in the individuation of the expression *the king of France*. Hence, you are able to use that very expression (although infelicitously) even if the presupposition fails. According to the Mill-Frege theory, in turn, being associated with a particular act of naming or being part of this or that appellative practice constitute the facts the obtaining of which

make it the case that a given token is in fact a token of a specific name. As a consequence, if the presupposition fails, i.e. if those facts do not obtain, the token you produced is not a token of a specific name at all; at most, what you did was tokening a generic name instead, viz. merely a token of a phonological or orthographical articulation.

In other words, if the descriptive metalinguistic sense in question figured in a semantic *presupposition* associated with the name, it should be possible to use the name infelicitously, that is, it should be possible to use that very name even though the presupposition fails. However, if we take the Mill-Frege theory seriously, it seems that it is not possible to do that: the Mill-Frege theory makes contexts of use and *felicitous* contexts of use collapse; all contexts of use of a specific name are contexts in which the alleged presupposition holds (otherwise, you wouldn't be using a name at all). If what has been said is correct, then the metalinguistic senses discussed by García-Carpintero are not part of a semantic presupposition.

Now, what about the evidence García-Carpintero provides in favour of the presuppositional view? The main argument consists in trying to show that proper names pass the 'Hey, wait a minute!' test:[4]

> We have been debating what to call the cat we recently adopted; I support 'Whiskers'. Other members of my household favour 'Flaubert'. A visit friend asks 'What is the new cat like?' Out of the blue, I answer:
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> (2)   Whiskers is adorable.
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> A supporter of the alternative name promptly objects: 'Hey, wait a minute, I did not know we had agreed on calling it Whiskers!' (García-carpintero 2017, 15)

We can analyse the case in the light of the previous objection. García-Carpintero presents the Whiskers case as an example of an implicit act of naming. The speaker attempts at introducing a specific name for the cat, i.e. to make 'Whiskers' semantically refer to the cat. If the community accommodates the alleged presupposition the act of naming is successful and a new specific name comes into existence. If, in turn, the community

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[4]   I will discuss two other pieces of evidence presented by García-Carpintero in the next section, once I sketch the Millian strategy I favour.

refuses to conform to that practice, the act is nullified. But the question is, if the alleged presupposition fails, i.e. if the act of naming is nullified, has the speaker used (infelicitously) a specific name, *Whiskers*₁, which refers to the relevant cat?[5] If what I have argued in this section is correct, she has not. The speaker has tokened a generic name, the phonological articulation /Whiskers/, but she has failed to make a specific name out of it. Crucially, this is unlike typical cases of semantic presupposition: if the audience fails to accommodate the presupposition that there is a king of France after an utterance of (1) this does not nullify the fact that *the kind of France* is a legitimate expression of English.[6]

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[5] García-Carpintero considers this question for explicit acts of naming of the form 'let's call … N'. He maintains that in those cases the occurrence of N is predicative and expresses a metalinguistic predicate whose application conditions involve a generic name. I agree with García-Carpintero on this (there is independent evidence that this type of occurrences are part of a small-clause involving a predicate – see Matushansky 2008). However, the question remains concerning implicit acts of naming (like the whiskers case) or simple occurrences of proper names in argument position in which the alleged presupposition is not satisfied. In this cases no expression of the form 'let's call … N' is used and the act of naming, if there is one, can only be implicit.

[6] A reviewer for *Organon F* brings up some possible counterexamples to my collapse argument. The first one is the case of empty names, like the famously discussed example of *Vulcan*. García-Carpintero does not discuss empty names in his paper, but we can apply the theory to this case. According to García-Carpintero's view, the sense associated with a token of a proper name, e.g. $Vulcan_i$, is something like 'whatever individual is picked out in the act of naming instituting the $Vulcan_i$-appellative practice to which **Vulcan** belongs'. This sense, in turn, is an ingredient of a semantic presupposition of the following form:

> For any use **Vulcan** of the proper name $Vulcan_i$, **Vulcan** refers to x if and only if x is the unique individual picked out in the act of naming instituting the $Vulcan_i$-appellative practice to which **Vulcan** belongs.

The reviewer interprets the right hand of the bi-conditional as involving an existence presupposition, something like '$\exists x$ such that x is the unique…' so that the presupposition fails if and only if no unique object was picked out in the act of naming. So, since there is no unique individual picked out in the act of naming instituting the $Vulcan_i$-appellative practice, the presupposition fails, hence a token of $Vulcan_i$ would be an infelicitous use of the name $Vulcan_i$. If this is correct, there are cases in which we see no collapse.

I have been interpreting the view differently. On my interpretation, the satisfaction of the presupposition does not guarantee that the name has a referent. This is suggested

To sum up. Presuppositions are constrains on felicitous contexts of use. So if a name triggers a presupposition you expect there'll be some felicitous uses of the name and some infelicitous uses thereof, depending on whether the presupposition is satisfied. But this is not what we see in the case of proper names (e.g. in the Whiskers case): if the presupposition is satisfied you have a felicitous use of the name; but presupposition failure nullifies the act of naming, preventing the name coming into existence. In that case you do not have an infelicitous use of the name, because you do not have a use of a name at all. Since this is not the behaviour one expects from semantic presuppositions, we must conclude that the metalinguistic description in discussion is not a semantic presupposition.

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by García-Carpintero's treatment of the Whiskers case, one of the examples of presupposition failure he discusses. In that case, the problem is not that the name does not refer, but that the act of naming failed. It is also the more charitable interpretation of the view if one considers *Vulcan* examples in the light of the 'Hey, wait a minute!' test:

    A: Vulcan is a planet
    B: #Hey, wait a minute! Vulcan does not refer to anything!

If my interpretation is correct, however, the alleged presupposition associated with the name is in fact satisfied in *Vulcan* examples: the token of the name in fact refers to whatever individual is picked out in the original act of naming (since there is no individual picked out in the act of naming instituting the $Vulcan_i$-appellative practice to which **Vulcan** belongs, **Vulcan** does not refer).

Secondly, the reviewer suggests that if one's metasemantics of 'semantic reference' for uses of proper names includes not only the intentions of the speaker but also the availability of such intentions to the audience, there might be infelicitous uses of proper names too. As I understand the suggestion, those would be uses in which a token of a name is appropriately related with a certain appellative practice and the speaker uses the name with the intention to refer to the unique individual fixed by that practice, but such intentions are not available to the audience. However, it is important to point out that this would constitute a non-trivial departure from García-Carpintero's view. Specifically, it would introduce requisites concerning the intentions of both speaker and audience into the presuppositions associated with proper names. Maybe this alternative view escapes my collapse argument, but (i) the view still has to be shown to be plausible and (ii) I don't think these cases threat the collapse argument as an argument against García-Carpintero's current version of the Mill-Frege theory.

3. A Millian story

According to the Mill-Frege theory, an act of naming creates a *specific* name, N_i, and fixes a referent for it, thereby instituting an appellative practice related to that name. A certain token is a token of N_i only insomuch as it exploits that appellative practice, in which case it refers to whatever object is fixed by the original act of naming, contributing only that object to truth conditions. Now, García-Carpintero maintains that the aforementioned facts figure in the semantics of the name, specifically as part of its presupposed content. In this section I sketch a Millian proposal which accounts for the aforementioned facts without making them part of the semantics of the name (not even in the broad sense of 'semantics' adopted by García-Carpintero).

In a Millian framework one can think of acts of naming and appellative practices as a collection of non-semantic (social, psychological, causal) facts[7] which ground a number of semantic facts: (i) the fact that there exists a certain specific name N_i, which possess a certain semantic reference—in the Kaplanian vocabulary, a constant character which outputs the same object, i, in every context—and is conventionally associated with a certain phonological string /N/, and (ii) the fact that a particular token of the phonological string /N/ is in fact a token of N_i, which inherits its linguistic features. Within this view, the mere fact that a token **n** is produced *as a token of the specific name N_i*, conveys (in some sense of 'convey' to be specified) the information that the previously mentioned social, psychological and causal facts obtain. In other words, it conveys the information that an appellative practice is in force, traceable to an original act of naming.

In order to make sense of this view, it is crucial to find a suitable way of understanding 'convey' in the previous paragraph, in particular one that

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[7] A thorough treatment of the numerous facts which determine the semantic reference of a proper name is beyond the reach of this article. It will suffice to note that it will involve psychological facts, like the existence of certain intentions on the part of language users, both in acts of naming which create proper names as in referential uses which conform to the practice, sociological facts, in order to account for what Sainsbury (2005, 106) calls *unwitting* baptisms (i.e. events which lead to an unintentional creation of an appellative practice) and causal facts (consider again Sainsbury's view, according to which some baptisms require an object-related intention/mental state, for which a causal interaction with the object is required).

does not involve incorporating the aforementioned facts as part of the semantics of the name. We can find a good candidate in Predelli's idea of use-imparted information (Predelli 2013; 2017), viz. information imparted by virtue of extra-semantic regularities encoded in the use of an expression. Predelli cashes out this notion in terms of what he denominates *settlement*. There are different forms of settlement, but the relevant in this context is Mere Settlement:

> Mere Settlement
>
> A use of an expression *e* in a context *c merely settles^T* a sentence *S* iff whenever $c \in CU^T(e)$, *S* is True.[8] (cf. Predelli 2013, 32-34)

That is, a use of an expression *e* merely settles^T a sentence if and only if that sentence is true in every context of use of *e* of a certain type *T*.[9] By way of illustration consider some of Predelli's examples. Since arguably tokening a linguistic expression requires intentional agents, every use of an expression in a context *c* merely settles the sentence 'there exist, have existed or will exist intentional agents in c_w'. That is, in every context of use of any expression the foregoing sentence is true. Likewise, every use of 'I am hungry' settles 'there exists, have existed or will exist tokens of a sentence which contains an indexical'. Crucially, this information is not conveyed by semantic means, wherever you draw the semantic line: it is information imparted by virtue of the peculiarities of linguistic use.

Now, the Millian can think of the kind of metalinguistic information which García-Carpintero locates at the presuppositional level as use-imparted information, merely settled by uses of proper names. According to this idea, a context of use of a specific name N_i is a context in which there is a token **n** of N_i, endowed with a particular character, viz. a constant function which outputs an object *i* in every context. Now, as we already said, on this view tokens are individuated by their belonging to a certain appellative practice and their being related with an original act of naming which uniquely fixed its semantic referent. Hence, every context of use of N_i is a

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[8]   Every sentence which is true in virtue of character alone is settled by the use of any expression. Mere settlement leaves aside these sentences.

[9]   Some sentences can be merely settled for some types of use but not for others. However, some sentences can be merely settled for *all* types of use.

context in which at c_w at least one expression semantically refers to i, that is, a context in which there is at c_w a corresponding act of naming/appellative practice which conventionally relates the generic name /N/ to i, so that i is the unique individual picked out in the act of naming instituting the N_i-appellative practice to which **n** belongs. In other words: every use of a specific name imparts the information that the non-semantic facts which must obtain for the specific name to exist, in fact obtain. Crucially though, this is not information encoded in the conventional meaning of the name but conveyed in virtue of the fact that a *specific* name was used.

The view roughly sketched above has the virtue of explaining several facts discussed by García-Carpintero, which supposedly support the thesis that there are metalinguistic senses which belong to the semantics of proper names. One of these facts concerns some patterns of inference which appear to be problematic for Millianism:

Peter is hungry
∴ Someone called Peter is hungry

Although logically invalid, this inference seems acceptable in some circumstances (see Leckie 2012 and Schoubye 2016). This represents a challenge for the Millian: it is not possible to account for the acceptability of the inference in terms of truth conditional content; but it seems that truth conditional content is the only explanatory tool the Millian has at her disposal, since for her names are just tags whose sole semantic contribution is the object to which the name refers. The Mill-Frege theory, in turn, can offer a straightforward explanation: the inference is not valid in general, but it is truth-preserving across felicitous contexts, i.e. contexts in which the presupposition of the premise is met and the premise is true. However, the Millian view previously sketched can also account for these patterns. On this view every use of a proper name N_i *merely settles* the sentence 'someone is called N_i'. Hence, the inference is truth-preserving for every context in which the premise is *used* and is true.

Another piece of evidence that García-Carpintero presents as supporting the Mill-Frege view has to do with speakers' awareness of the metalinguistic description in question, manifested in their disposition to accommodate alleged presuppositions (as it would be the case in the Whiskers case, if the audience did not object the assertion). This fact, however, is

compatible with a Millian account as the one presented above. On this view the existence of a social convention (an appellative practice) which is being exploited by the name user is information imparted by extra-semantic means, by virtue of it being the fact which individuates the name and grounds its having these or those semantic features. Thus, it is expected for speakers to be able to somehow recover or become aware of the fact that an appellative practice is in place or, to the contrary, to point out that the token produced is not associated with any appellative practice, i.e. it is not a token of an actual specific name.

In addition, we should point out that accommodation alone is not a re-liable test for presuppositionality. Accommodation involves adjusting the 'conversational score', in Lewis' terms, so as to ensure (ceteris paribus and within certain limits) that the speakers' utterances will come out true, or otherwise acceptable (Lewis 1979). The process might take place in the face of presupposed content but also while fixing the values of implicit arguments, establishing reference points ('come', 'go' and so on) or, cru-cially, resolving lexical or structural ambiguity. So the fact that the audi-ence is ready to accommodate the proposition that the referent of a certain name is called 'N' is compatible with the non-presuppositional, Millian po-sition just outlined: if someone uses an articulation /N/ bare in argument position the audience will try to ensure (ceteris paribus and within certain limits) that the utterance will come out true or otherwise acceptable. That involves accommodating the fact that the articulation employed is that of a specific name, i.e. that there is an appellative practice which is being ex-ploited by the speaker. Put differently, the fact that the audience accommo-dates is not the semantic fact that the specific name being used refers to this or that object, but the pre-semantic fact that the articulation being to-kened is in fact a specific name.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, we have shown that the Mill-Frege view faces a serious problem. On the one hand the claim that names trigger semantic presuppo-sitions involving a descriptive metalinguistic sense, when combined with the theory's stance concerning the way of individuating specific names, has an unwelcome consequence, namely that of making contexts of use and

felicitous contexts of use collapse, against presuppositions' expected behaviour. On the other hand, I showed that several facts which allegedly support the presuppositional view can be accounted for within a Millian approach.

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