Should a Causal Theory of Reference Borrowing Be a Descriptive-Causal Theory?

LUIS FERNÁNDEZ MORENO[1]

ABSTRACT: In a reference theory a distinction can be made between a theory of reference fixing and a theory of reference borrowing. M. Devitt and K. Sterelny, and especially the former, have been relevant figures in the present debate on reference theories. They have supported a descriptive-causal theory of reference fixing for proper names and natural kind terms, but they have held a purely causal theory of their reference borrowing. Once I have put forward the main elements of Devitt's and Sterelny's theory of reference fixing I will focus on their reference borrowing theory. In this regard I will examine some of the differences between Devitt's and Sterelny's causal theory of reference borrowing and Putnam's thesis of the division of linguistic labor concerning natural kind terms. After taking into consideration the views of some causal theorists who have not rejected or have even explicitly admitted that there are descriptive requirements in a reference borrowing theory for proper names and natural kind terms, I will allege that a causal theory of reference borrowing for competent speakers should not be a purely causal theory, but a descriptive-causal theory, where the minimum descriptive component is some general categorial term that is true or approximately true of the referent of the term.

KEYWORDS: Categorial term – descriptive-causal theory – natural kind term – proper name – reference borrowing – reference fixing.

✉ Luis Fernández Moreno

Department of Logic and Theoretical Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy
Complutense University of Madrid, 28040 Madrid, Spain

e-mail: luis.fernandez@filos.ucm.es

1. Devitt's and Sterelny's theory of reference fixing
and reference borrowing

A theory of reference provides the answer to the question of how expressions get connected (that is, refer) to an entity or to certain entities. However, in such a theory a distinction can be made between a theory of reference *fixing*, which explains how the referent of a term is initially determined, i.e., by the speaker(s) who introduced it, and a theory of reference borrowing, which explains how the reference of the term is determined for the rest of the speakers.

In (1999), a classic book in contemporary Philosophy of Language, which I will treat as the backbone of my considerations, Devitt and Sterelny support a purely causal theory of reference borrowing for proper names and natural kind terms, but they claim that the theory of the ostensive reference fixing[2] for both sorts of expressions[3] has to include *descriptive* components and thus be a *descriptive-causal* theory. Since I will allege that some of those descriptive elements should also be involved in a theory of reference borrowing, I will first pay attention to the main constituents of Devitt's and Sterelny's theory of reference fixing, and as they deal with proper names before natural kind terms, I will begin by taking into consideration their reference fixing theory for proper names.

At the basis of the quandary that has led Devitt and Sterelny to sustain that a theory of reference fixing for *proper names* must contain descriptive

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[2]   Since Devitt's and Sterelny's theory of reference fixing for proper names and natural kind term focusses on their ostensive introduction and thus on their ostensive reference fixing, this is the only sort of reference fixing theory I will be taking into consideration.

[3]   In regard to (paradigm) proper names Devitt and Sterelny use the term "designation" and concerning general terms – and hence natural kind terms – the term "application". Instead of these expressions I will generally use the term "reference", which they employ for "the genus of which all referential relationships – for example, application, designation, denotation – are species" (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 312). On the other hand, in the case of proper names the vehicles of reference for Devitt and Sterelny are name tokens (or uses of names); however, I will often simply speak of proper names or names. It is to be assumed that a similar consideration would apply to natural kind terms, although concerning them I will also speak of that sort of terms and not of their tokens (or uses), and with respect to this type of terms I will use indistinctly the notions of reference and extension.

components underlies the ambiguity of the ostension to the object involved in that reference fixing, but by means of the name we intend to refer to the object *qua whole object*. The *disambiguation* of the reference requires, according to Devitt and Sterelny, that the introducer of the name *conceptualize* the object by means of "some general categorial term" (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 80), in such a way that if he were very wrong about it, the name would *lack* reference. Thus, they assert that the theory of reference fixing for proper names "must be a 'descriptive-causal' theory: a name is associated, consciously or unconsciously, with a description in a grounding" (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 80).[4] Regarding this, it should be assumed that such description is a demonstrative one that contains the general categorial term in question.

By *categorial term* Devitt and Sterelny seem to understand sortal terms in the broad sense,[5] that is, terms that convey a criterion of *identity*. When they use the expression "general categorial term" they allude to highly

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[4] In order to allude to an initial baptism (initial introduction) of a term in the sense of Kripke's (Kripke 1980), Devitt and Sterelny use the term "dubbing", and they call "dubber" the (initial) introducer of the term. They understand by "grounding" "a perception […] of an object that begins a reference determination causal chain for a term" (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 310). The notions of grounding and dubbing are related, and therefore those of grounder and dubber, since a dubbing of a term is the initial grounding of the term – Devitt and Sterelny claim that there are usually multiple groundings of a term (see note 14 below). Since the notion of grounding is more general than the one of dubbing, in the rest of the paper I will mainly use the former, but I will speak of dubbing or dubbers when it is required to emphasize that I mean the initial grounding or grounders.

[5] Sortal terms in the strict sense provide criteria for individuation and for identity concerning the entities to which they apply; thus count terms are sortal terms in the strict sense. On the contrary, mass terms have no criterion for individuation governing their application, although they do have one of *identity*. They are not sortal terms in the strict sense, but some authors occasionally use the notion of sortal term in a broad sense (see, e.g., Hale & Wright 1997, 685), according to which the distinguishing feature of sortal terms should be to convey a *criterion of identity*, a feature shared by count terms and mass terms. I will denominate the terms possessing this feature *categorial terms*, following some of the suggestions in Devitt & Sterelny (1999, 80 and 90; see also Devitt 1981, 63 f.). These terms can be simple or complex, and they form indefinite descriptions with an indefinite article, and in the case of categorial mass terms, with the further aid of certain classifier phrases.

general terms of that type.[6] On this matter it is worth mentioning that they give the terms "animal" or "material object" (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 80) as examples of the general categorial terms involved in the grounding of a name for a cat; however the term "material object" will not generally fulfill the role of disambiguating the reference.

The reference fixing theory put forward by Devitt and Sterelny in (1999) concerning *natural kind terms* bears similarities with their theory about proper names, but there are some differences, especially that the grounding of a natural kind term involves a perceived *sample* of objects of the kind and that it includes "an ostensive component and a 'nature' component" (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 88).

The extension (reference) of a natural kind term will contain all the samples of the *same kind*, i.e., those that share the same *underlying structure or nature* as the ostensively given sample in that grounding. Devitt and Sterelny claim that the reference fixing (grounding) of natural kind terms involves us in the *qua*-problem, whose source is that "the term is applied to the sample […] *qua* member of a natural kind but also *qua* member of one particular kind" (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 91). Since two parts can be distinguished in this *qua*-problem, these authors allege that in order to sort out this problem, providing the required disambiguation of the entities given in the grounding, *two descriptive components* are rendered necessary. However, to our aim, what is especially relevant is the first part of the *qua*-problem, whose solution requires that "the grounder of a natural kind term associates, consciously or unconsciously, with that term […] some description that in effect classifies the term as a natural kind term" (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 92).[7] The aim of this descriptive component is to establish that the term to be introduced is a *natural kind term*.[8] Although

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6   In this paper I will use the expression "general categorial term" in this sense. Categorial terms are general terms, but by the use of that expression I will refer to highly general categorial terms.

7   In the proposed solution for the *qua*-problem concerning proper names and natural kind terms Devitt and Sterelny assert that the association of descriptions with such expressions takes place "consciously or unconsciously". By this I understand that the association in question can be implicit or explicit. I will assume this view.

8   The solution to the second part of the *qua*-problem requires that the grounder associates with the natural kind term "some descriptions that determine which nature of the

these authors are not very definite in this regard, it is to be assumed – by parallelism with the *qua*-problem for proper names – that in the formulation of the descriptions that classify a term as a natural kind term and in which it is appealed to entities given ostensively it is necessary to resort, implicit or explicitly, to some *general categorial term* that conceptualize those entities as members of a natural kind.[9]

As we have said, Devitt and Sterelny hold a *purely causal* theory of reference borrowing. The basic idea of their theory for (paradigm) proper names is that by virtue of the causal-perceptual link between a name and an object, the grounder, and other speakers at the grounding, acquire the *ability* to use the name to refer to the object. Those speakers will use the name in conversation with others and the latter will acquire the name and borrow its reference from the former speakers – the *lenders* – by acquiring from them that sort of ability on the basis of the perception of the use that the lenders make of the name; thus the acquisition of the *borrowers*' ability to refer to an object by a name also involves a causal process. In this way those latter speakers – by the exercise of that sort of semantic ability – will refer to the object in virtue of causal chains that link the object with uses of the name caused by the ability acquired from the lenders. So the name will be transmitted through the linguistic community at the same time as the abilities to use the name to refer to the object are passed on, and as new links are added to the causal chains involving the uses of the name, which constitute a causal network – the latter usually being multiply grounded in the object (see note 14 below). However, the properties that borrowers

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sample is relevant to the reference of the term." (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 92). The aim of this second sort of descriptive component is to determine *which* of the natural kinds the sample belongs to will be the referent of the term – the sample will usually belong to several natural kinds of different generality, like gold, metal, element, etc. On this matter, Devitt and Sterelny claim that it is necessary to resort to descriptions of certain *macroscopic properties* of such objects, in particular, of observable properties and causal powers macroscopically discernible – see Devitt & Sterelny (1999, 92) and Sterelny (1983) –, since the relevant underlying structure will be the one responsible for such properties.

9   Thomasson (2007, chapter 2), holds the view that the reference fixing of proper names and general terms, like natural kind terms, requires that those terms be associated with categorial terms, which contribute to disambiguate the intended reference. This author also replies to criticisms against the indispensability of that sort of descriptive requirement.

could associate with a name *do not determine* the reference of the name as
they use it, since they need not be possessed by the referent of the name.

Devitt's and Sterelny's theory of reference borrowing, first put forward
for proper names, is similar to the one concerning natural kind terms. Like-
wise, as in the case of proper names, the properties that borrowers could
associate with a natural kind term do not determine the reference of the
term as they use it, since it is *not necessary* that those properties be pos-
sessed by the entities of the kind.[10]

Devitt and Sterelny have made several explicit assertions concerning
the absence of descriptive requirements in the reference borrowing. For
example, they assert that "the pure-causal theory of reference borrowing
does not require borrowers to associate with a term any [true] description
of its referent. This […] [is] appropriate for names and natural kind terms"
(Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 97). They also claim that "borrowers do not have
to associate the *correct categorial term*" (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 80; em-
phasis added). In a later writing Devitt asserts that "the theory of reference
borrowing shows how a person can be linguistically competent with a word
despite being *largely* ignorant, or even wrong, about its referent. People
can be competent with the name 'Catiline' despite knowing *very little* about
Catiline" (Devitt 2006, 139; emphases added).

In (1999) Devitt and Sterelny claim that the competence with a term
consists in the ability acquired in a grounding or reference borrowing to
use a term to refer to an object or to samples of objects. According to them
all reference borrowers of a term (proper name or natural kind term) are
competent with the term, but even accepting this claim for the sake of the
argument – see section 3 –,[11] the question arises whether the borrowers'

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[10]   Kripke's theory of reference borrowing for proper names and natural kind terms is also
purely causal, since the reference of a term as used by borrowers is exclusively determined
by their membership in a causal chain *independently* of the descriptions or properties they
could associate with the term, since these do not play any role in such reference determina-
tion (see Kripke 1980). This does not exclude that the borrowing includes an intentional
component, as it also happens in Devitt's theory (see section 2).

[11]   According to Devitt and Sterelny the reference borrowing with respect to a term
entails competence concerning the term. Since in section 3 I put that claim into question
I will sometimes use the expression "competent borrowers". This expression can seem
redundant in the case of Devitt's and Sterelny's theory but it leaves the option open that
there are borrowers who are not competent, which is my view.

linguistic competence with a word is compatible with great ignorance or error about its referent, and in case that for this competence it is required to know "very little" about the referent, what is the descriptive component that competent borrowers have to associate with the term. My proposal will be that the minimum component required of competent borrowers will be some *general categorial term* (or equivalently the corresponding property) which is true or approximately true of the referred entity.[12]

2. Devitt and Sterelny on Putnam's division of linguistic labor

Although Devitt and Sterelny claim that competent speakers acquire an ability to refer to members of a natural kind in a grounding or reference borrowing, it is plausible that the speakers that acquire a better or rather a more reliable ability to refer to the members of a natural kind are the *experts*, in Putnam's sense, one of the main notions of his (hypo)thesis of the division of linguistic labor concerning natural kind terms.[13] Since Devitt and Sterelny, and especially the former, have made some remarks on

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[12]   Jutronić in (2008) has held a similar although stronger view; she claims that "reference borrowing involves the borrowers having to associate *the correct* categorial term and have some *true* beliefs about the referent in the guise of some associated description" (2008, 358 emphases added). However, my argumentation is different and independent from hers. In any case, I would like to make two comments. Firstly, there is usually more than one categorial term associated with a proper name or a natural kind term that could be considered as true or correct of its referent. Secondly, I would introduce the caveat "approximately true" that I have taken from Putnam (see section 3) – and in the same way "approximately true" beliefs, also used by Putnam. The aim of this nuance is to block the arguments from the ignorance-and-error type that could be put forward concerning borrowers, although Putnam does not present his proposal in this framework.

[13]   On this matter two comments are adequate. Firstly, after Putnam (1975c), like in (1988), Putnam does not talk any longer of the "hypothesis of the universality of the division of linguistic labor", but simply of the *division of linguistic labor*, assumed as a thesis he subscribes (see Putnam 1988, 22), and so I will consider it in the following. Secondly, Putnam sometimes speaks, and Devitt and Sterelny always do (see below), of the "linguistic division of labor" (see, e.g., Putnam 1975c, 274 and 1988, 25) instead of the "division of linguistic labor". Putnam uses both expressions interchangeably (see Putnam 1988, 22, 25 and 37).

Putnam's central notions involved in that claim, it seems appropriate to present some of Putnam's views before taking those comments into account.

As is well-known, in his theory concerning how the reference or extension of natural kind terms is determined (see Putnam 1975c) Putnam underlines two contributions, to which he alludes as the *contribution of the environment* and the *contribution of the society* – on these contributions see Putnam (1975c, 227-234, 245, 265 and 271), as well as (1988, chapter 2). On the one hand, the extension of a natural kind term depends on how our environment or our world is since it is determined by underlying properties of the members of the kind belonging to our world. On the other hand, the discovery of the underlying properties is a matter of scientific research and those who carry it out or, in a more general way, who are able to apply reliable *tests* to distinguish members of a natural kind from entities not belonging to it – those are called "experts" by Putnam – are more knowledgeable than the average speaker concerning the membership conditions into a natural kind and hence into the extension of the corresponding natural kind term. There is in this regard, in Putnam's words, a *division of linguistic labor*, in such a way that the average speakers or non-experts rely on experts and are willing to *defer* to experts concerning the determination of the reference of natural kind terms as they use them. Thus, an entity falls into the extension of a natural kind term used by the average speaker if it falls into the extension of the term as used by the experts and the average speaker is linked by relationships of cooperation or rather of links of *deference* with the experts in question.

Concerning the notion of expert it is relevant to point out that, although members of the relevant scientific community are experts *par excellence*, the group of experts has to be conceived in a *broad* sense, since the experts are those members of our linguistic community that are able to apply the mentioned tests, but those tests do not need to include the explicit description of the underlying properties of the members of the kind – in case they are known. In this way, for instance, concerning the word "gold" Putnam considers as experts on gold not only atomic physicists and chemists but also metallurgists, miners and jewellers (see Putnam 1996, XVI).

The main notions of the thesis of the division of linguistic labor are those of expert and deference. Regarding this, Devitt and Sterelny claim that although the dubbers of a natural kind term may be experts in Putnam's sense,

they need not be so, although at least some of the experts will be later *grounders* of the term.[14] They also assert in (1999) that "Putnam brings out the significance of reference borrowing by talking of 'the linguistic division of labour'" (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 88), and Putnam seems to agree with that claim, since in a paper on Devitt's views Putnam identifies the division of linguistic labor with the reference borrowing (Putnam 2001, 498).

On this matter it is relevant to point out that in a passage of Devitt (2006), he comes to *identify* reference borrowing with deference (Devitt 2006, 138), but later he *distinguishes* them for two reasons:

> (1) If *x* borrows the reference of a term from *y*, then that is an act at the time of receiving *y*'s communication. In contrast, if *x* defers to *y*'s use of a term, then that suggests an act at the time of *x*'s using the term herself to communicate. (2) Furthermore, talk of deference invites a confusion between *epistemic* deference to experts *when seeking knowledge*, which we should all be in favour of, and *semantic* deference to experts *when referring*, which causal theorists oppose. (Devitt 2015, 116-117)

When characterizing the notion of deference in the first part of this passage, Devitt does not allude to Putnam. However, when Devitt speaks in the second part of the passage about deference he is taking into consideration Putnam's notion of expert. Therefore, it is to be assumed that what Devitt asserts on deference in the first part of the passage would also concern Putnam's theory.

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[14]   As already said in note 4, Devitt and Sterelny claim that there are usually multiple groundings of a term. They put forward the thesis of multiple grounding concerning proper names as follows: "many uses of a name are relevantly similar to a dubbing […] [since] they involve the application of the name to the object in a direct perceptual confrontation with it […]. Such uses of a name ground it in its bearer just as effectively as does a dubbing. As a result it becomes multiply grounded" (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 75). And these authors hold a similar thesis concerning natural kind terms: "Multiple grounding is important with natural kind terms, as it was with names […] [A] natural kind term is grounded just as effectively [as in the dubbing] by subsequent groundings" (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 89-90.). Devitt and Sterelny proposed the thesis of multiple grounding mainly to explain the changes of reference that proper names and natural kind terms may experience, but I cannot enter into this matter here.

However, Putnam never held, what seems to be implied by Devitt's claim (1), that the speaker defers to experts *whenever using* a term (to communicate). The deference to experts in Putnam's sense involves the speaker's intention to defer to experts, but in Putnam's theory there is no clear indication concerning when that deference takes place. It can happen at the time when the speaker acquires or uses a term for the first time but it can also concern *further* speaker's uses of the term, although not necessarily all of them.

It is worth mentioning that Devitt distinguishes between the initial borrowing and the later use of the borrowed term; although both are intentional acts,[15] in Devitt's causal theory of reference borrowing, at least after his version in (Devitt 2008), the resort to the notion of deference does not play any role therein, since "according to the causal theory, the later use *need not involve any intention to defer to the earlier borrowing*" (Devitt 2008, 362); furthermore, none of the uses of a term by the borrower require to be accompanied by the intention to defer, and the borrower "need not defer to the lender" (Devitt 2015, 116). Thus, in Devitt's theory the borrowing of a term does not need to involve deference. In my view, Devitt's assertion (1) in the quoted passage from Devitt (2015, 116-117) can only be justified in the sense that reference borrowing is not the same as deference; therefore the equivalence of reference borrowing with deference and with the linguistic division of labor should be rejected. The rejection of the relevance of (semantic) deference is alleged more clearly in the second part of the passage, i.e., in assertion (2).

However, in this assertion Devitt is *assuming* his version of the causal theory which in this regard agrees with Kripke's theory, according to which deference to experts in Putnam's sense – the core of the division of linguistic labor – does not play any role in the determination of reference.[16] On

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[15] Kripke's theory also embodies an intentional component, since he claims that for a borrower, or rather for the use of a name by a borrower, to be a link of the causal chain involving a name – and the same will hold concerning natural kind terms – it is required that, when he learns the name, he *intends* to use it with the *same reference* as it was used by the speaker from whom he learnt it (see Kripke 1980).

[16] It is noteworthy that Kripke does not accept the notion of expert in Putnam's sense; for Kripke the only experts concerning the reference of terms are those speakers who have introduced the terms in an initial baptism (see Kripke 1986).

this subject, in (1999) Devitt and Sterelny allude to the grounders as "experts", between inverted commas, for example, in assertions of the sort "the 'experts' who fix the reference" (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 97), and distinguish them from experts in Putnam's sense – with no quotation marks – alleging that "[the] grounders may be experts […], but it is not essential that they be" (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 89). However, according to what was said above, at least in works from Devitt (2008) Putnam's thesis of the division of linguistic labor, which involves the (semantic) deference to experts, does not play any *role* in Devitt's reference theory, but it would be a mistake if the reason for that should be the confusion alleged by Devitt in assertion (2). In my view there is no such confusion; indeed, the experts are those speakers who *know* more than the average speaker concerning natural kinds, since they have better tests to distinguish members of a natural kind from entities not belonging to it and therefore better criteria for the *reference* of natural kind terms than the average speaker. The supposed confusion arises from *assuming* the sort of causal theory of reference Devitt sustains, but in that regard Devitt is begging the question.

It is worth mentioning though, that in works in which Devitt and Sterelny still accepted the relevance for a reference theory of Putnam's thesis of the division of linguistic labor, after asserting that, as mentioned above, "Putnam brings out the significance of reference borrowing by talking of 'the linguistic division of labor'" (Devitt & Sterelny1999, 88; see also Devitt 2006, 138 and note 161), Devitt and Sterelny describe a scenario in which an *apprentice jeweller* learns the term "platinum" from another speaker. But since an apprentice jeweller is an apprentice expert,[17] it may be supposed that he learns the term "platinum" from an *expert* who shows him a sample of platinum uttering, as those authors say, the words "That is platinum", but in that scenario there is no allusion at all to deference in Putnam's sense. Devitt and Sterelny assert:

> Consider the case of an apprentice jeweller learning the term 'platinum'. A sample of platinum is pointed out to him with the words, 'That is platinum'. He gains an ability to use the term to refer to platinum, an ability grounded in the metal by this introduction. His later uses of the

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[17] As already said Putnam claims that among the experts on gold – and the same will apply to platinum – are jewellers (see Putnam 1996, XVI).

> term, exercising that ability, will refer to the metal in virtue of their
> causal link to it. (Devitt & Sterelny1999, 89)

This passage gives rise to several remarks. Firstly, the question arises whether the apprentice jeweller gains the ability to refer to platinum *exclusively* by perceiving a sample of platinum accompanied by the utterance "This is platinum" and hence whether the apprentice expert's later uses of the term will designate samples of platinum solely by virtue of his causal link to that sample. Although the answer to these questions concerning the said apprentice jeweller would be affirmative if Devitt's and Sterelny's causal theory of reference borrowing is accepted (however, see the second paragraph below), the answer should be negative if the thesis of the *division of linguistic labor* is assumed, as Devitt and Sterelny did in (1999). The answer is negative because to the extent that the apprentice expert is learning the term "platinum" from an expert, his ability to refer to platinum will be at least partly determined by the beliefs or knowledge about platinum – and thus, by *descriptions* – that he learns from the expert, which will involve tests to identify samples of platinum and distinguish them from samples of other substances; this is a condition to be an expert on platinum from whom the apprentice expert is acquiring the ability to refer to platinum, and to whom the apprentice is *deferring*.

Secondly, Devitt's and Sterelny's proposal regarding the first sort of the *qua*-problem involved in the reference fixing or *grounding* of natural kind terms is applicable to the scenario they present in the quoted passage. The use of a term by an expert – "That is platinum" – is another grounding ("introduction" is said in the passage) of the term "platinum" and in this regard let us bear in mind, as mentioned above, that there are usually multiple groundings of a term. As already said, according to Devitt and Sterelny in the grounding of a natural kind term in which it is appealed to entities given ostensively it is necessary to resort, implicitly or explicitly, to some *general categorial term* that conceptualize those entities as members of a natural kind.

Thirdly, that thesis about grounding has consequences on borrowing. Regarding this, if we focus on the act of pointing to the sample of platinum in question uttering in that context the words "That is platinum", it can be claimed that, given the ambiguity of the ostension, the demonstrative "that" must be supplemented with some general categorial term that disambiguates

the particular sample concerned; in this example the term could be, e.g., "metal": "That (sample of) metal is (a sample of) platinum". And since in the said context the borrower is learning the term "platinum" and borrowing the reference of the term, he will associate with the term "platinum" a general categorial term, like the term "metal".

Thus, even leaving aside the more specific beliefs or knowledge of the expert from whom the apprentice jeweller is borrowing the term "platinum", it can be argued from a more general level that some general categorial term is required for those cases of reference borrowing which involve the ostension to a sample of the term's referent. Therefore, the theory of reference borrowing on natural kind terms, at least in the case contemplated by Devitt and Sterelny in (1999) regarding the apprentice expert, and some features of this case can be generalized, should be *descriptive-causal* and not purely causal.

3. A moderate epistemic view of the reference borrowing for competent speakers

Although Devitt and Sterelny do not pay attention to this fact, there are several *causal theorists* who have not rejected, or have even explicitly admitted, the thesis that there are descriptive requirements in a theory of reference borrowing. I will take into consideration two of them, K. Donnellan and H. Putnam.

Donnellan, one of the main advocates of the *historical-causal theory*, does not question the necessity to incorporate *descriptive* components in a borrowing reference theory for proper names, whose claims should extend likewise to that sort of theory concerning natural kind terms; for this reason I will sometimes speak simply of "terms".

In Donnellan's most famous paper devoted to criticizing the description theory of reference on proper names, i.e., Donnellan (1972), he does not dispute the claim that it may be a necessary condition – although not a sufficient one – for an entity to be the referent of a term as used by the *borrowers* that such an entity satisfy some description that they associate with the term. However, he considers that it is too strong a requisite to demand that this description has to be an identifying description, i.e. a description sufficiently specific to uniquely identify one individual (Donnellan

1972, 366-367). In this regard, he does not find the claim objectionable "that our use of the name ['Aristotle'] is such that being a human being or not living in modern times, etc. are *necessary* for being the referent of the name" (Donnellan 1972, 367).

In this passage Donnellan does not reject the thesis that there are descriptions or general terms associated with a term which may be considered necessary for an entity to be the referent of the term; among them are those that express the *type* of entity referred to as well as other general properties of the referent. Nonetheless, since in the case of different individuals the second class of properties can be very different, the most comprehensive unquestioned property is that of being a type of individual or entity, in the example of the name "Aristotle" the property of being a human being, where the term "human being" is, of course, a general categorial term.

Let us take Putnam into consideration, an advocate of the *causal-social theory* – he calls his view of reference a "causal/social outlook" (Putnam 1975d, 281). This author holds more definitely the requirement that the borrower must associate some descriptive components with the borrowed term. Although Putnam has not proposed a theory of proper names, he claims that "unless one has some *beliefs* about the bearer of the name that are *true or approximately true*, then it is at best idle to consider that the name refers to that bearer in one's idiolect" (Putnam 1975b, 203; emphases added). Concerning this, he gives the following example: "I do not see much point, for example, in saying that someone is referring to Quine when he uses the name 'Quine' if he thinks that 'Quine' was a Roman emperor, and that is all he 'knows' about Quine" (ibid.). However, this is compatible with the claim that the speaker associates with the term "Quine" some "minimal linguistic information […], namely that it is a person's name" (Putnam 1975b, 201). Thus Putnam is not questioning that the speaker associates with the name "Quine" the general categorial term "person" or, what is relevant for our considerations on Donnellan's example and other subsequent ones, the term "human" or "human being" – or the corresponding properties.

I agree with a similar claim to the one put forward by Putnam in the passage from (Putnam 1975b, 203), according to which some of the descriptions or properties that users of a term and especially *borrowers* associate with it must be true or *approximately true* of the entity that constitutes its referent for those speakers to refer to that entity. In this respect, it is

relevant to make at least two remarks. Firstly, in that passage Putnam is *not* speaking about competence, but only about users of terms (to refer), who include reference borrowers; thus, from that passage nothing is derivable about Putnam's view on the conditions for a speaker to be competent regarding a proper name.[18] However, since according to Devitt and Sterelny reference borrowing entails competence, the claim by Putnam (in 1975b, 2003) could be extended within the framework of Devitt's and Sterelny's theory to that group of competent speakers, the "competent borrowers" (see note 11). Secondly, the term "approximately true" is not in contexts of this sort susceptible of a precise analysis, but although Putnam does not say so, the aim of introducing the nuance "approximately true" is in my view, as already said in note 12, to block the arguments from the ignorance-and-error type. Nevertheless, if someone asked me for an example of a property approximately true of an entity, I would put forward the following example. Let us assume that, although I and the people around me do not know it, my friend Richard is in fact a very sophisticated robot, not a human being, but with the external behaviour, all of the external features and some of the internal ones, even emotional feelings, characteristic of a human being. The property of being human would not be true of Richard, but would be approximately true of him, since he shares many properties with human beings. To those considerations underlies the view that the borrowers cannot be *completely ignorant* or *wrong* about the properties of the entity they refer to; e.g., if a borrower, who had learnt the name "Richard" in a purely causal way, would associate with the name "Richard" the property of being a river, a mountain, a building,… or only properties that do not apply at all to Richard, we could allege that we lack any justification to consider that by means of the name the borrower is referring to such an entity, or in Putnam's words, "it is at best idle to consider that the name refers to that bearer in one's idiolect." Of course, in this field, like in most fields in philosophy, there are no arguments that definitively decide a question, but only plausibility claims, and I consider Putnam's view plausible. In any case, we have already quoted a passage from Devitt (2006, 139), where he

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18 Nevertheless, from his assertion in Putnam (1975b, 201) it could be alleged that according to Putnam a competent speaker regarding the name "Quine" is to associate with it the general categorial term "person".

asserts about that sort of competent speakers that according to him reference borrowers are, that "[borrowers can be] largely ignorant, or even wrong, about its referent [the referent of a word]", but that is not the same as being *completely* ignorant or wrong about it, and he concedes in the same passage that borrowers can know "very little" about the referent. My answer to the question of what that "very little" can consist of is that the reference borrowers regarding a term have to associate with it at least the property of being the type of entity that the referent is, which is expressed by some general categorial term and the latter has to be true or approximately true of the referent.

However, in his theory of natural kind terms Putnam speaks more explicitly of *competence*, and according to Putnam's view concerning this sort of terms, all competent speakers will have to associate with a term, implicitly or explicitly, the syntactic markers, the semantic markers and the stereotype of the term (see Putnam 1975c). The most relevant of these factors for this paper are the last two, although Putnam claims that "in the extreme case, the stereotype may be *just* the [semantic] marker: the stereotype of molybdenum might be *just* that molybdenum is a *metal*" (Putnam1975c, 230), where the property of being a metal indicates the type of entity that molybdenum is. In the cases in which the stereotype is different from the semantic markers, the main feature to distinguish the second from the first is that the semantic markers are "category-indicators of high centrality" (Putnam 1975c, 268) and hardly revisable, although semantic markers as well as the properties included in the stereotype are not analytically associated with the natural kind term in question. However, according to Putnam these properties must be associated with the term for the speaker to be competent concerning that term. And this claim also applies to the reference *borrowers* insofar as they are competent speakers. In his (1975c) Putnam mainly details the syntactic markers, the semantic markers and the stereotype concerning the term "water". In this case the stereotype includes many properties, since the average competent speaker associates many of them with the term "water" – colorless, transparent, tasteless, thirst-quenching, etc. (Putnam 1975c, 269) –, but in other cases – and this happens concerning many natural kind terms, and not only in extreme cases – the stereotype will coincide with the semantic markers, and since we are interested in the question of whether there are descriptive components involved in the reference borrowing, in this case of natural kind terms, the

answer will be affirmative if at least the properties contained in the *semantic markers* (or at any rate, properties approximately identical to them)[19] are involved therein, and they will be expressed by general categorial terms – in the case of "water", e.g., by the term "liquid".

I already mentioned some assertions in Devitt & Sterelny (1999) and in other works by Devitt questioning the necessity of including descriptive components in a theory of reference borrowing or at least somewhat reluctantly conceding that the reference borrowing may comprise some *small* descriptive components, although Devitt avoids entering into this question. Thus, assuming that words express concepts, Devitt asserts that "the theory of reference borrowing places *very little* epistemic burden on the linguistically and conceptually competent […] There is, of course, room for argument about *just how little* an epistemic burden should be placed on the competent, but *we need not join this argument*" (Devitt 2006, 139; first and last emphases added).[20] And he hesitantly gives as an example of the descriptive component required for the reference borrowing of a word, or of its corresponding concept, that of the *type* of entity the referent is: "Perhaps there is some small epistemic burden on the person's conceptual competence so that the concept has some non-linguistic determiners; for example, perhaps the concept ‹Aristotle› has to be associated with the concept ‹human›" (Devitt 2006, 40). This example is basically the same as that given by Donnellan regarding the same name "Aristotle" and by Putnam with respect to the name "Quine".

According to the assertions by Putnam, partially by Donnellan, and more hesitantly by Devitt – despite Devitt's and Sterelny's asseverations in (1999) on the contrary – it is plausible that competent borrowers will have to associate some descriptive component which is true, or at least approximately true, of the referent of the terms, proper names and natural kind

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[19] Some years after his (1975c), Putnam claimed that for two speakers to have acquired a natural kind term is not necessary that they associate with the term the same stereotype, but rather sufficient similar stereotypes (Putnam 1987, 271). It is to be assumed that this thesis would also be applicable to the semantic markers. However, according to the passage quoted above from Putnam (1975b, 203) I prefer to speak of "properties approximately identical" to the ones contained in the semantic markers instead of "properties sufficiently similar" to them.

[20] Concepts are the correlates in the language of thought – hypothesis accepted by Devitt – of the words of a natural language; thus words express concepts.

terms, which they borrow. In this regard the least questionable descriptive component is very general, i.e. the one concerning the *type* of entity referred to, which will be expressed by some *general categorial term* – and hence by the indefinite description formed with it. If the speaker is *completely* ignorant or wrong about the type of entity the referent is, it can be questioned that the borrower be a competent speaker.

Of course, the latter claim depends on what is required to be a competent speaker. As already said, in Devitt's and Sterelny's view in (1999) reference borrowing entails competence, but we can leave aside that specific view of competence and assume a more theory-neutral view of competence in a language, which they characterize as "the ability to produce and understand sentences with the sounds and meanings of that language" (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 188; Devitt 2006, 201).

According to that theory-neutral view, our judgment on (lexical) competence depends on our conception of understanding and meaning. The authors who adopt a view of meaning strongly relying on a causal theory of reference will support a purely causal theory of competence. A view of that sort is proposed by Devitt and Sterelny, who identify the *sense* of a proper name mainly with "the property of designating its bearer by a certain type of causal link between name and bearer" (Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 67). Although hardly anyone else has shared that view of sense, this should be mitigated by Devitt's claim already quoted according to which "the theory of reference borrowing places very little epistemic burden on the linguistically and conceptually competent" (Devitt 2006, 139), but "very little" is still something. And although he does not want to deal with the question about what that "very little epistemic burden" should consist in, in the example he hesitantly gives, as indicated above, that "burden" concerning the proper name "Aristotle" is expressed by the general categorial term "human", which conveys the type of entity that Aristotle is. Another view of that sort, but different from the one held by Devitt and Sterelny, is the one embraced by advocates of the direct reference theory. However, even some of them also concede hesitantly that a competent speaker regarding the term "water" has to associate with this term the property of being a liquid (see Soames 2005, 184).

In fact, it is plausible that a competent speaker concerning the word "water" – i.e., who understands that word – associates with it at least the property expressed by the general categorial term "liquid", one regarding

the word "Aristotle", the property expressed by the general categorial term "human being", etc., or some approximately identical properties. If such a view is accepted one should also admit a certain sort of epistemic component in the notion of competence,[21] and that component is constituted by the property expressed by some general categorial term that conveys a general property of the referred entity, the type of entity it is. I should emphasize the character of centrality of those properties, since such comprehensive properties are more central than more specific ones. Thus, it is more central for the competence concerning the term "Quine" the property expressed by the term "human being" than the one expressed by the term "human being who was born on 25 June 1908 in Akron, Ohio". So the most central properties would be the most general or comprehensive properties,[22] which are the less susceptible to be questioned by the arguments of the ignorance-and-error type.

This view of competence, however, gives rise to some questions and, in particular, the following two. Firstly, since there are many general categorial terms that can be associated with a term – proper name or natural kind term – which express properties that are true or approximately true of its referent, the question arises regarding what to say about a speaker who associates with the term some of those properties, but not others. Let us assume that a speaker knows that Quine is a human being, but not a philosopher. From my point of view this speaker is competent insofar as he is knowledgeable about a general property that is true of Quine, although he is not as competent as other speakers that know that Quine is a human being and a philosopher. Competence, at least according to an epistemic view of

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[21] Devitt has maintained that linguistic competence is "a piece of knowledge-how not knowledge-that" (see, e.g., Devitt 1981, 95-103; 1996, 52; 2006, 89-94 and 106, 2010, 142, n. 17 and 285; Devitt & Sterelny 1999, 173 ff.). Further to my foregoing considerations, the competence concerning proper names and natural kind terms must contain a modest knowledge-that, although in a different sense from the one meant by Devitt in his criticism of the knowledge-that's view of competence, according to which after "that" there should come "a sentence expressing something semantical about the language" (see Devitt 1981, 95).

[22] On this subject, someone could claim that the term "material object" is still more general than the examples of general categorial terms I have indicated above. But the information provided by the corresponding property is practically null, almost as null as that expressed by the so-called dummy sortals, such as "object", "thing", etc.

it, is a matter of degree. Thus, speakers who know many general properties that are true – or approximately true – of the referent of a term are more competent than other speakers who know a few or only one general property that is true – or approximately true – of the referent. Secondly, the question could be raised as to the necessity or sufficiency for the competence concerning a term of properties expressed by general categorial terms. On this matter my view is quite modest: the minimum necessary and sufficient condition for the competence about a term is expressed by some general categorial term that is true or approximately true of its referent.

At this point, it can be argued as follows. Speakers can be divided into different sorts. On the one hand, the grounders of a term, who associate descriptive components with the term to sort out the *qua*-problem concerning proper names and the two parts of the *qua*-problem regarding natural kind terms; on the other hand, the *competent borrowers* of the term, who associate with the term some general categorial terms that express very general properties that are true – or approximately true – of the referent, and that convey the type of entity referred to. Lastly, those speakers who, although having borrowed the term, are completely ignorant or wrong about the properties, even the most general ones, possessed by the referent of the term. Only the first two sorts of speakers are *competent*. Concerning the latter it could be claimed that even if they were to refer to an entity by the use of a term according to a purely causal theory of reference borrowing, they would have no idea whatsoever about the type of entity they refer to and so in this sense they have no idea as to what they refer to. Accordingly, they are not competent speakers concerning the term in question.[23]

Thus, my contribution to the debate concerning the theory of reference borrowing is that, adopting a moderately epistemic view of competence, at least the descriptive component required for the reference fixing of proper names in Devitt & Sterelny's theory in (1999) and the first descriptive

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[23]   A referee made the suggestion of not building the descriptive requirement into the theory of reference borrowing, but rather into the theory of what it is to be competent with a term. I could agree with this suggestion, but this is not the case in the theory of reference borrowing put forward by Devitt and Sterelny, the backbone of this paper, which joins both aspects. That is, according to those authors, the speaker who borrows the reference of a term – in a pure causal way –is a competent speaker concerning the term.

component needed to be associated with a natural kind term for its reference fixing in such a theory, i.e., some *general categorial term,* is also a requisite for the competence of reference borrowers. Therefore, as long as causal theorists consider borrowers as competent speakers, they should maintain a *descriptive-causal theory of reference borrowing*, which involves causal chains – or a causal network – in addition to some general categorial term, which is true or approximately true of the referent of the term.

Acknowledgments

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