

A Summary of 'Causal Descriptivism'

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1. Introduction

The aim of this essay is to summarize 'Causal Descriptivism'. The paper 'Causal Descriptivism' was written by Frederick W. Kroon.¹

2. Some Backgrounds of Causal Descriptivism

There are at least two descriptivisms: classical descriptivism and causal descriptivism. Classical descriptivism says that what names refer to is determined by descriptions that express properties. Kroon says that classical descriptivism has few adherents now. Causal descriptivism says that what names refer to is determined by descriptions couched in causal terms. Kroon wants to defend causal descriptivism.

Some causal descriptions have the form 'the individual referred to by uses of the name N from which I acquired the use of N'. But something more than these is needed for the following reasons: (i) I may know of more than one individual called N, and (ii) I may be the first to introduce the term N, say on the basis of perception.

Kroon says that the term 'causal descriptivism' seems to be David Lewis's. Kroon counts that Brian Loar, Michael McKinsey, and John Searle are causal descriptivists.

3. Debates about Causal Descriptivism

There are at least three groups about descriptivism: causal descriptivists, causal neutralists, and causalists. Causal descriptivists think that the best explanation for the evidence is a kind of descriptivism, and not causalism. Causal neutralists argue that causal descriptivism and causal theories really amount to equivalent descriptions of the same phenomena. Causalists think that no descriptivist account can capture the mechanism of name-reference. Kroon says that causal descriptivists are right. Kroon claims that causality plays too large a role in semantics for causalism to capture.

4. A Scenario That Is Related to Causal Descriptivism

Suppose that A tells B as follows:

(1) Dumas was the best friend I ever had.

B subsequently wonders as follows:

(2) Who was Dumas?

In this scenario, A is saying that Dumas was his French poodle whom he named after his favorite author, Alexandre Dumas. Suppose that hearing A utter (1) is the first time B hears the name 'Dumas'. Suppose that (2) contains the first use on B's part of the name 'Dumas'. Some causalists will claim that B's use of the name 'Dumas' will refer to A's poodle by such and such causal chains. However, Kroon thinks that causalists' answer is false. Suppose that B knows that A often uses names of the famous as names for animals. In this case, the meaning of (2) is 'Who was the *original* Dumas?' Kroon thinks that causalists cannot give the right answer to this question.

¹ Frederick W. Kroon, 1987, "Causal Descriptivism", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 65:1, 1-17.