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### On Expression Identity: A critical notice of Robert Fiengo and Robert May, *De Lingua Belief*

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# Critical Notice

## On Expression Identity

A critical notice of Robert Fiengo and Robert May, *De Lingua Belief*. MIT Press, 2006. Pp. 224. ISBN 10: 0262062572. \$32.00.

### Introduction

Robert Fiengo and Robert May's intriguing and interesting 2006 book, *De Lingua Belief*, is a sequel to their 1994 book, *Indices and Identity*. Both concentrate on questions about expression identity, except that whereas the first focuses primarily on these questions in the context of a theory of anaphora, the new book focuses on the beliefs that speakers have about the semantic values of linguistic expressions, 'beliefs speakers have about the language they know and use' (p. 1) – their *de lingua* beliefs. Fiengo and May (hereinafter, F & M) invoke such beliefs in order to attempt to resolve longstanding puzzles in the philosophy of language and semantics. Speakers have 'extensive and complex' sorts of beliefs about their language, but F & M restrict their attention to two particular sorts: those about the semantic values of linguistic expressions and those about the syntactic identity of linguistic expressions. Our discussion here will concentrate on the second sort.

### 1 F & M's Account

F & M distinguish names from linguistic expressions that 'contain' them. Names, for them, are much like Kaplan's (1990) generic words – different individuals can 'bear' the same name – but any linguistic expression that contains the name can refer to no more than a single individual. A name like 'Nixon' can therefore be used to pick out different individuals on different occasions of use. When a speaker believes that 'Nixon' refers to Nixon, he has one individual in mind. F & M call these latter 'occurrences of a name' *linguistic expressions*.<sup>1</sup> Sameness of linguistic expression ensures sameness of semantic value, and so, [<sub>1</sub> Obama] (their notation for a linguistic expression that contains the name 'Obama') must refer to the same individual on each occasion of use, if it refers at all.

Only one linguistic expression contains<sup>2</sup> the name ‘Nixon’ and refers to the former president, while another linguistic expression contains the same name but refers to a professional baseball player. This raises the question of how F & M individuate linguistic expressions. Though sameness of name-type is a necessary condition for sameness of some linguistic expressions, they do not think that it is sufficient, since distinct linguistic expressions may contain the same name. What other conditions are needed? While they never straightforwardly answer this question, they do suggest that certain beliefs are pertinent. They say that, provided that other necessary conditions are met,  $\phi$  and  $\varphi$  are the same linguistic expression for a speaker S if, and only if, S believes that they are the same expression (see, for example, p. 53).

On this speaker-relative proposal, it makes no sense to ask, ‘How many “Obama” expressions are there (in the lexicon for English)?’ Each individual has his own lexicon, and only in the context of a speaker-relative lexicon can questions about expression identity be meaningfully pursued.

This distinction between names and linguistic expressions is crucial for F & M’s solution to Kripke’s puzzle (pp. 72ff.): recall Kripke’s Peter, a person who is rational and of sound logical acumen, and who, upon hearing first of a famous non-musical politician called ‘Paderewski’ and then of someone also so-called but without musical talent, affirms both the sentence, ‘Paderewski has no musical talent’ and the sentence, ‘Paderewski has musical talent.’ Unbeknownst to Peter, these are one and the same person. Despite this coincidence, it still seems reasonable to affirm both the sentences ‘Peter believes that Paderewski has no musical talent’ and ‘Peter believes that Paderewski has musical talent.’ Does doing so, however, require attributing contradictory beliefs to him, frustrating the intuition that he is rational despite his unfortunate situation?<sup>3</sup>

According to F & M, the answer to this last question is ‘not at all’ (p. 72): in Peter’s idiolect, there are two linguistic expressions ‘<sub>1</sub> Paderewski’ and ‘<sub>2</sub> Paderewski’ containing the same name.<sup>4</sup> And Peter is committed *not* to the self-contradictory sentence ‘<sub>1</sub> Paderewski has musical talent and <sub>1</sub> Paderewski has no musical talent’, but rather to the sentence ‘<sub>1</sub> Paderewski has no musical talent, but <sub>2</sub> Paderewski does.’ There is no more inconsistency in believing true this latter sentence than there is in believing true ‘Brian is from New Jersey, but *Brian* is not’, where the two occurrences of ‘Brian’ pick out different people.

## 2 Problems

Whatever merits the distinction may have, I will advance consideration for thinking that neither this distinction between names and the linguistic expressions that contain them nor the solution that exploits this distinction is sustainable. In this part, I will first briefly examine and evaluate F & M’s

characterization of names, and then offer a longer discussion of their characterization of linguistic expressions. I will survey both internal and external motivations for their account. Lastly, I will look at some reasons for thinking that their account might render impossible our ordinary practices of content sharing and accuracy in indirect reporting.

### 2.1 Names

First, F & M say that names are lexical items ‘uniquely specified by certain linguistic properties. Among these are phonological, morphological, and syntactic properties’ (p.14), though not semantic ones. Accordingly, ‘Cicero’ and ‘Tully’ are deemed distinct names *because* they are spelled and/or pronounced differently (in each speaker’s idiolect<sup>5</sup>). But this manner of distinguishing names requires that they *not* admit of distinct spellings and pronunciations. As Kaplan acknowledges (Kaplan, 1990: pp. 115–16), we say that the generic name ‘John’ was pronounced differently in Shakespearean times than *it* is today; and that the names ‘Shawn’ and ‘Sean’ are pronounced the same today, even though we count them as distinct names. Given this flexibility in judgment about name identity, we need an answer from F & M as to what prevents the name ‘Cicero’ from being a different spelling of the name ‘Tully’.

The performance profile of the name ‘Cicero’ might change over time; it might even admit of different pronunciations depending on whether we are speaking with children or Latin teachers. And, regardless of how we pronounce or spell a given name, mightn’t it have turned out differently? Nothing intrinsic in its shape or form individuates all of its uses. But, then, what prevents ascribing contradictory beliefs to another on the basis of his affirming ‘Tully is great but Cicero is not’? Why prevents it from being of the form ‘A is F and A is not F’?

### 2.2 Linguistic Expressions

F & M’s discussion of linguistic expressions left us with similar concerns. As far as I can tell, their technical notion of a linguistic expression comes closest to what linguists have called ‘lexemes’. Linguists invoke lexemes, *inter alia*, in distinguishing between ambiguity – as exemplified by the unrelated meanings of ‘bank’ – and polysemy – as exemplified by the family of related meanings of ‘healthy’ (as applied, for example, to animate objects, animal excretions, and food) and ‘window’ (as applied, for example, to both the physical object and its frame, as in ‘He opened the window’ and ‘He went through the window’).

Confronted with an ambiguity, we are not surprised to learn that an ambiguous expression maps on to distinct ones in other communities; with polysemy we normally would be (though there are many counter-examples).

According to linguistic lore, with ambiguity *distinct* linguistic expressions are in play. But with polysemy only *one* linguistic expression has a variety of connected semantic potentials. The technical term ‘lexeme’, then, is employed for posits of this linguist orthodoxy.

### 2.2.1 Linguistic Expressions and Lexemes

Among the considerations that induce linguists (and some philosophers<sup>6</sup>) to say that two different lexemes are associated with the single string ‘bank’, one concerns distinct etymologies. It is a condition on ambiguity that the corresponding distinct lexemes are ‘developed’ or ‘evolved’ from formally distinct lexemes: the use of ‘bank’ that means *a raised shelf or ridge of ground* has its roots in the Old Norse word *banke* and the use that means *financial institution* has its roots in the Old French word *banc*. Another consideration includes distinct distributional reflexes. By and large, anaphora and ellipsis work differently for ambiguity and polysemy. We say, ‘He opened the window and went through *it*’ (where ‘it’ is anaphorically tied to ‘window’ even though the two occurrences exhibit slightly different meanings – physical object and frame); likewise, we say, ‘He is healthy and *so is* the food he prepares for his family’, but we do *not* say (except as a pun), \*‘He put some money in a bank and then swam to *one*’ or \*‘After losing forty pounds, he is light and *so is* the colour of his hair.’<sup>7</sup>

Lexemes offer a potentially attractive explanation of these distributional data: an anaphor can be tied to the original only if the lexeme in the original is appropriate to the environment in which the anaphor appears.<sup>8</sup> Might we invoke lexemes in vindicating F & M’s distinction between names and linguistic expressions that contain names?

I concede that there are uses of linguistic expression that point in the direction of lexemes. The relevant frame of mind here is one that Lyons (1977) invoked in his seminal discussion of lexemes, where we are willing to make such claims as:

- (1) ‘Find’ and ‘found’ are versions of the same linguistic expression.

Claims like (1) abstract from the surface in a radical way. In that frame of mind, it is natural to say (2):

- (2) ‘Will’ and ‘willed’ are both versions of the same linguistic expression.

Similarly, in *that* frame of mind, it is also natural to say (3):

- (3) ‘Will’ and ‘would’ are both versions of the same linguistic expression.

But it is *less* natural to say that ‘willed’ and ‘would’ are versions of the same linguistic expression.

And in *this* frame of mind, it would seem that we are committed to there being two linguistic expressions associated with 'will'. Let us grant, then, that there are contexts in which the locution 'linguistic expressions' is used to pick out lexemes. However, it is far from clear that this can be used as a basis for vindicating all of what F & M have to say about linguistic expressions. Making *that* case would require, for example, that different lexemes be manifested by the name 'John', one as it occurs in 'John Donne' and one as it occurs in 'John Travolta'. But what would ever justify this conclusion?

Notice that the fact that different people are denoted by *uses* of this name in various contexts does not settle the issue. Polysemous uses of a single lexeme generate varying denotations as well. Insofar as the data provide guidance, they do not seem to support an ambiguity thesis. It is felicitous to say both 'She is Janet, and so is she' (pointing to a different person) and 'Every Janet that I know ...'. These data tell against an ambiguity, and hence, against lexeme proliferation.<sup>9</sup> Associating many lexemes with the string 'John' in English is bad linguistics. Treating distinct linguistic expressions with the same name as distinct lexemes, I think, may tell against F & M's views, and *not* in their favour.

### 2.2.2 *Linguistic Expressions and Anaphora*

F & M suggest that some (but obviously not all) linguistic expressions *contain names*:

Two (name-containing) expressions are identical only if they contain the same name.

But they also hold that pronouns that are 'bound' (c-commanded) by linguistic expressions containing names are *identical* (expressions) to their antecedents, and so it would seem to follow (by Leibniz's Law) that these bound pronouns must also contain names! But suppose the string 'John loves John' corresponds to the sentence '[<sub>1</sub> John] loves [<sub>1</sub> John].' (It might also correspond to the sentence '[<sub>1</sub> John] loves [<sub>2</sub> John].') Shouldn't the string 'John loves himself', given F & M's account of linguistic expression individuation, correspond to the first sentence; and so shouldn't the linguistic expression 'himself' contain the name 'John'? This is an odd result with untoward consequences.<sup>10</sup>

Consider the strings 'Only John loves himself' and 'Only John loves John.' According to F & M, there should be a joint reading of them according to which they correspond to the same sentence ('Only [<sub>1</sub> John] loves [<sub>1</sub> John]') (since for F & M c-commanding implies identity), but we can retrieve no such reading; and so they *cannot* correspond to the same sentence.<sup>11</sup>

### 2.2.3 *Linguistic Expressions and Ordinary Usage*

Putting worries about how best to individuate names and the linguistic expressions that contain them to one side, we still find that the distinction between the two is difficult to reconcile with ordinary usage. It is difficult to access a true reading of ‘The first names of John Travolta and John Kerry correspond to different words’, but don’t F & M predict that this string should have a true reading, namely, the one corresponding to the sentence ‘<sub>[1</sub> John] Travolta and <sub>[2</sub> John] Kerry have first names that correspond to different words?’

Other worries, I believe, also arise over how to interpret (i)–(iii). Suppose you believe that ‘Frege’ refers to Frege; it seems, then, that you should be able to affirm coherently any of (i)–(iii):

- (i) ‘Frege’ might have meant Frege without my believing it.
- (ii) ‘Frege’ might have meant something without my being aware of it.
- (iii) ‘Frege’ and ‘Fergie’ could have meant the same thing without my believing it.<sup>12</sup>

But it seems to me that F & M’s theory predicts that (i)–(iii) are self-contradictory. Since expressions are individuated by speaker beliefs, it makes no sense for an expression to mean something without the speaker having the relevant beliefs.

I wonder whether F & M might not attempt to account for the intuitions that (i)–(iii) are not self-contradictory by maintaining that in each case ordinary speakers are not locking on to the technical notion of a linguistic expression, but rather on to something like the notion of a ‘generic name’ or ‘orthographic type’. After all, F & M are perfectly willing to accept the claim that the *name* ‘Frege’ could have been part of an expression which referred to someone else besides Frege. Perhaps, the reason (i)–(iii) seem non-contradictory is only that ordinary speakers confuse the generic notion of a name with the technical notion of a linguistic expression.

I am happy to grant that ordinary speakers lack an ability to form beliefs or intentions about the technical notion of a linguistic expression. However, if ordinary speakers lack this ability, then their existence cannot be motivated by observations concerning the behaviour of ordinary speakers. Perhaps, F & M hold that the best support for their account invokes *not* ordinary usage but rather its theoretical advantages. How well, then, does their account explain (away) the relevant puzzles surrounding uses of names?

### 2.3 *F & M and the Puzzles*

Suppose Peter is not irrational, given his circumstances, in affirming both the strings ‘Paderewski is talented’ and ‘Paderewski is not talented.’ According to F & M (p. 76), this requires him to have two linguistic

expressions in his lexicon corresponding to a single name. But how then is someone in the know to go about reporting what is happening without ascribing irrationality to Peter? The natural report is to say, 'Peter said both that Paderewski is talented and that Paderewski is not talented, but he can't be both.' F & M require this pronoun 'he' to be bound by both occurrences of 'Paderewski', but this in turn requires that these occurrences correspond to a single linguistic expression. It follows that the report – which is perfectly appropriate – turns out to be *inaccurate*. So, we are confronted on their account with the following dilemma: if a reporter uses the same linguistic expression to report both occurrences of 'Paderewski' in Peter's mouth, then he misreports him; *but* if he uses different linguistic expressions to report these two occurrences, then his report winds up being *ungrammatical*! If this is right, then that's bad enough; but even worse, I think, their account fails to generalize.

If F & M were right about identity confusion, then their account should generalize and apply to a range of cases where names are irrelevant. So, suppose someone is told 'No one has ever lived here' but then is later told, 'Someone once lived here.' Suppose further that even though he has excellent evidence that these two uses of 'here' refer to different places, in fact they refer to the same place twice over. This scenario is perfectly parallel in structure to the Paderewski case, and therefore, it should receive a similar solution. But any such solution applied to this case would require there to be *two* linguistic expressions in play, '[<sub>1</sub>here]' and '[<sub>2</sub>here]'. Certainly, some will be unwilling to absorb this consequence, but I believe that if you adopt F & M's account it will need to be absorbed. Given the complete similarities between this case and the Kripke cases, a unified account of both is to be expected. The account F & M provide, however, seems ill-suited for the case of 'here'.

F & M might respond in either of two ways. They might bite the bullet and posit multiple lexical entries for 'here' (and other indexicals such as 'that'). Alternatively, they could deny that their account extends to expressions like 'here', and instead invoke a resolution to the puzzle that goes beyond the resources of their theory.

Each of these responses, I believe, faces difficulties. The first way results in an *ad hoc*, bloated lexicon. It is implausible to suppose that every time we use an indexical or demonstrative expression our lexicon grows. What utility is there to a lexicon if new entries can be so easily added? And the second response leaves us wondering why we need an F & M-style framework in the first place *if* Kripke-like puzzles can be so easily resolved for 'here'. Absent a special reason for thinking that names behave differently than indexicals in this respect, the second response offers F & M not much of a reply.

A more reasonable explanation of the identity-confusion data shuns expression individuation and instead relies exclusively on the notion of particular *uses* of a single name. Suppose you encounter a use of the name



‘John’ by a speaker U. You may then go on to use that name with the controlling intention that your use of ‘John’ refers to whichever object U was referring to with his use of ‘John’. On this construction it may still turn out that a speaker thinks – wrongly – that the two uses pick out distinct persons.

#### 2.4 *Shared Content and Indirect Reporting*

Considerations like those stemming from Kripke’s puzzle lead many, including F & M, to individuate the semantic content of a typical belief attribution very finely. However, people who hold views of this form often have trouble explaining how speakers are able at times to say or to believe the very same thing.

Suppose that in one context Rob sincerely utters the string ‘Tom is happy’ and in another Dean also utters the string ‘Tom is happy.’ Suppose further that Gina overhears them both speaking and that, while she knows they referred to the same individual (Tom), she knows little else about Rob’s and Dean’s beliefs. In such a situation, Gina could still truly utter any of (1)–(3):

- (1) Rob and Dean both said that Tom is happy.
- (2) Rob and Dean said the same thing.
- (3) Rob said that Tom is happy, and Dean said that too.

But how is this possible in F & M’s framework? Given the way F & M individuate the referents of that-clauses, it is unclear how speakers could ever manage to share contents in the way that (1)–(3) seem to require.

It is important that we distinguish two distinct though related problems created by cases (1)–(3). The first problem is about *saying* and *believing*: it concerns how, given F & M’s framework, two individuals could ever say or believe something with the same semantic content. Call this the problem of *shared content*. It’s my contention that F & M make the prospects for shared content look bleak. This, I believe, follows from three central aspects of their framework:

- (i) The claim that the contents of a belief or utterance varies with the expression(s) used to express this belief or utterance, and
- (ii) The claim that questions about expression identity can only be asked in the context of each person’s individual lexicon, and
- (iii) The further claim that it is rare for individuals to ever fully share a lexicon.

(p. 53)

Given (i)–(iii), it would seem to follow that it is rare for two individuals truly to share content. Without further explanation of why (1)–(3) seem true to us, F & M's theory remains incomplete.

A second problem concerns *indirect reporting*: reports like (1)–(3) are quite straightforward from the perspective of the reporter; Gina hears what two speakers say, and proceeds to report them indirectly. F & M's account, however, I believe, renders ordinary indirect reporting difficult to practise. In order to be entitled to report Rob's and Dean's utterance with (1)–(3), Gina must first believe that Rob's and Dean's personal lexicons overlap in such a way that they have the very same 'Tom-containing expressions'. But in the case described, she hardly seems entitled to this belief. To be so entitled, she would have to know a great deal more about Rob and Dean; in particular, she would need to know a great deal more about each of their *de lingua* beliefs. Since (1)–(3) seem perfectly appropriate in the case described, F & M's theory remains incomplete for me.

### Conclusion

Fiengo and May offer *a* solution to Kripke puzzles that requires a distinction between names and linguistic expressions that contain them. Though their account is both creative and novel, it remains incomplete. In my discussion I posed some worries over their individuation criteria for names and linguistic expressions. I also pushed the idea that any attempt to assimilate linguistic expressions to the linguists' theoretical notion of a lexeme fails. The account seems incompatible with distributional data, for example, about ellipsis and anaphora, and it does not seem to me well motivated by the ordinary usage of the notion of a word. Even if good sense could be made of their conception of a linguistic expression, I argued that the account does not seem to explain for the puzzling data; and furthermore, that it overgeneralizes to linguistic categories (for example, indexicals) for which it seems particularly ill-suited. The discussion ended with a metaphysical worry about whether content sharing remains possible on F & M's account, and lastly, with a semantic worry about whether F & M's account renders certain intuitive indirect reports false. Though I am quite attracted to meta-linguistic solutions to Kripke's puzzling data, largely for reasons F & M so elegantly articulate, their linguistic (or even pre-linguistic solution), as of yet, I believe remains incomplete.

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### Notes

- 1 F & M conflate 'occurrence' and 'token' (p.18). This is an unusual usage. In the sentence '[<sub>1</sub>John] loves [<sub>1</sub>John]' the linguistic expression '[<sub>1</sub>John]' is normally

- said to *occur* twice regardless of how many times it's *tokened*. As typically used, 'occurrence' is true of abstract entities – for example, words – while corresponding concrete entities are said to *token* these abstract entities.
- 2 They also use the locution 'is a part of' as in 'The name is a part of the linguistic expression.' I am not sure how to cash out this use of 'contains' ('part of'). Presumably, it requires that the particular abstract shape (or shape) is a part of the abstract entity that is the linguistic expression. Though I am suspicious of this sort of talk, I'll leave it to one side for now.
  - 3 As Kripke is careful to emphasize, the belief in question is supposed to be read *de dicto*. See Kripke (1979).
  - 4 F & M represent the distinction between names and expressions by placing expressions in brackets, so '[Obama]' stands for an expression of the name 'Obama'. When there are distinct expressions containing the same name-type, as we saw with the name 'Nixon', I place subscript numbers in the expressions to distinguish them; '[<sub>1</sub>Nixon]' and '[<sub>2</sub>Nixon]' stand for distinct linguistic expressions. Expressions can thus be distinguished either by containing different name-types (as in '[Biden]' and '[Pelosi]') or by containing the same name-type with different subscripts (as in '[<sub>1</sub>Aristotle]' and '[<sub>2</sub>Aristotle]')
  - 5 There are passages in which they suggest that questions of individuation of names and linguistic expressions in general can only be asked of idiolects. This restriction, if it is in force, will render it very difficult to make judgments about shared ontological commitments with respect to words. This worry is particularly serious in a context of one speaker reporting another. More below.
  - 6 'If one of the tokens [of 'bank'] refers to a financial institution and the other to the edge of a river, it is implausible to insist that they belong to the same type' (Szabo, 1990: p. 148). See Gillon (2004) for more discussion.
  - 7 As a heuristic, linguists sometimes appeal to counting dictionary entries. While one expects multiple distinct dictionary entries for 'bank', one would not for 'red', 'window' or 'healthy'.
  - 8 It is unclear whether the historical and distributional ideas are complementary. The string 'right' is standardly treated as an ambiguous one – largely for distributional reasons. But those uses of 'right' that mean *a direction* and those that mean *correctness* turn out to have a common etymological origin. In the end, historical evidence plays an evidential, but not a constitutive role in the thinking of most contemporary linguists on the subject: if 'right' has distinct 'analyses' flowing from distinct 'lexical entries', then more than one lexeme is in play even with a unity in historical origin for both.
  - 9 I note in passing again that some linguists often refuse to treat names as words, but I shall put that issue to one side here.
  - 10 F & M are *not* insensitive to this worry. They write, 'Two NP's may be occurrences of the same syntactic expression even though one may contain the name "John" and the other the pronoun "he"' (p. 57). But I don't see how they avoid this untoward result.
  - 11 A parallel argument can be run on 'If either John or Bill leaves, *he* must pay to get back in.'
  - 12 As we will see below, even the simple "'Frege"' could have meant something different than it actually means' causes serious problems for F & M.

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