Dissertation Title: Defining Marks: Essays in the Theory of Names
Adviser: Christopher Peacocke

In my dissertation I address a range of questions about how the meaning and function of referential language relates to that of descriptive language, focusing on how these arise for the semantics and pragmatics of proper names. It is natural to think that names are devices for referring to things, not for predicating anything of them; and that names, unlike descriptions, do not tell us about the properties of what they pick out. This suggests names and descriptions are fundamentally different types of expressions, distinct in function and in meaning. I reject this, and defend an account of names on which they have the logical form of descriptions. I argue that this is compatible with truisms about the referential function of names, and with denying that their function is to describe their referents. The thought is that while being an Alfred is a linguistic property had by all and only things that satisfy the description bearing-“Alfred”, this does not directly entail anything further about the properties of the Alfreds. Yet there is another sense in which the name Alfred does tell us about the Alfreds, one that falls short of entailment. Gender, race, class and many other properties are manifestly associated with names, and this non-semantic sense in which names are descriptive is as crucial for understanding them as the fact that they are descriptions at the level of logical form.

The dissertation is in three parts. In the first, “Names With Varying Satisfiers”, I give a new argument for the Predicate View of names. On this view, a given name $N$ is a predicate that applies to an object just in case it meets the metalinguistic condition bearing-$N$. This is opposed to the referentialist view, on which names just stand for the objects we refer to with them. I present data best explained by the Predicate View. For example, suppose my grandmother has always owned a cat, but is unimaginative about names for cats. I inform you: “Pyewacket is always a shorthair”. Suppose instead I find the sofa torn to shreds. I complain of the cat that tore up the sofa: “Pyewacket is always a nuisance.” The two sentences are structurally identical, but in the first case the name does not refer, and gets a bound reading, where different cats at different times are named Pyewacket and are shorthairs; in the latter a referential interpretation of the name is preferred. This dual semantic behavior is predicted by the Predicate View, not the referentialist. I explain why such examples have been neglected, argue that they are significant for the semantics of names, and characterize the sorts of contexts that yield the relevant interpretation. I conclude by sketching what I take to be the referentialist’s best strategy for accounting for the data, and argue it is less satisfying than the Predicate View.
The next part of the dissertation, “Pseudonyms”, has a dual purpose: it offers a theory of the literary practice of using pseudonyms, distinguishing pseudonyms from garden variety proper names and from neighboring phenomena like fictional names and aliases. It also demonstrates the explanatory significance of connotations of names, which I define as properties like gender, class, race, etc. that are associated with names, but which play no role in their semantics. Speakers regularly infer a bearer has such properties solely on the basis of a name. They explain, for example, the surprise one would have in discovering someone called Ritsuko Uchida is not a Japanese woman but a German man. Such inferences are always defeasible, which marks them out as extra-semantic. Pseudonyms exploit this feature of names, since a work can be presented as if by someone with this or that gender or nationality, irrespective of the bearer’s actual properties. This creates a fiction about an author’s properties solely on the basis of the name. I argue that connotations of names have their source in beliefs about the linguistic communities in which the names are used.

In the third and final part, “Are Numerals Names?”, I apply a lesson of the Predicate View to the philosophy of mathematics. Numerals in natural language seem to occur in grammatically distinct ways, in argument position (“two is a prime number”) and as determiners (“there are two options”). I argue against a strategy (recently revived by Thomas Hofweber) for explaining away the former name-like occurrences of numerals in terms of the latter ‘adjectival’ occurrences, with the goal of eliminating reference to numbers (on nominalist grounds). Hofweber assumes there is a straightforward incompatibility between the view that numerals are essentially modifiers and that they can also stand for objects. I show that we can make the same ‘adjectival’ assumption as Hofweber about the basic type of numerals, but assume additional structure for the argument position occurrences and recover a complex singular term. So the nominalist aspirations of this strategy are misplaced, even granting some of its basic assumptions.

The picture that emerges from my dissertation is one on which names turn out to be more complex, both in their semantic contribution and in their communicative role, than has yet been fully appreciated. Bearing a name turns out to be a matter of satisfying a description, a metalinguistic description. This is important because it explains facts about what linguistic constructions names occur in and how they contribute to their truth-conditions, while respecting the platitude that names are without intrinsic significance. Uninformative in themselves, names are nonetheless richly informative in light of further relational beliefs about them. These are beliefs about what kinds of entities get which names in which linguistic communities, the phenomenon I call connotations of names.