WHAT IS A SINGULAR TERM?

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Consider any singular term which does not contain a variable. [1] «Betty», this stone», and «the closed door» are examples. Most philosophers accept Quine's interpretation of what makes these singular terms: An expression is a singular term just in case: [2]

> (D) For every open sentence, the result of substituting the expression for a free variable is an acceptable sentence.

So on Quine's view what shows that, for example, «this stone» is a singular term is that the result of substituting it for a free variable in every open sentence (e.g. «x is heavy») is always an acceptable sentence (e.g. «This stone is heavy»).

This is incorrect. The reason is that contrary to (D) no singular term is substitutable into *every* open sentence. My purpose is to establish this. What has not been recognized, then, is that the structure of a singular term is not the same as that of a free variables.

(1) is an example of the type of sentence which establishes that (D) is incorrect:

> (1) This stone is thinking about Vienna.

Quine maintains that we should take it to be acceptable. One motivation for this approach is that it eliminates counter-examples to (D). What Quine has failed to realize is that this also results in (D) being circular.

So suppose we take (1) to be unacceptable. Then, as we will show, it provides a counter-example to (D).

Consequently regardless of whether we take a sentence like (1) to be unacceptable or acceptable, it follows that Quine has not defined what is a singular term.

First I will show this. Then I will consider what would be Quine's reply.

I. (D) is incorrect

I disprove (D) by showing that if it is not circular, then it follows that there are counter-examples. There are singular terms which contrary to (D) are not substitutable for a free variable in every open sentence. We will find that every singular term is a counter-example to (D).

For instance, consider (1). Following (D) 's instructions, it can be obtained by substituting the singular term «this stone» for the free variable in the open sentence:

(2) x is thinking about Vienna.

I will show that in order for (D) not to be circular we must take (1) to be unacceptable.

The unacceptability of a sentence like (1) is what is at issue here. For if it is unacceptable, then it provides a counter-example. This is shown by the fact that from the unacceptability of (1) it incorrectly follows from (D) that «this stone» is not a singular term. Let me prove this.

Let's begin with the point that the concept of an acceptable sentence is used in (D). Take *any* interpretation of «acceptable sentence». For the purpose of defining «singular term» there are two requirements the interpretation must satisfy.

The first is the more important. It is that the interpretation should not result in the definition of «singular term» being circular. This implies that when determining whether according to the interpretation a sentence is acceptable, we cannot use the concept «singular term». ([3])

The second requirement is that the interpretation should find a sentence like (3) unacceptable:

(3) If is thinking about Vienna.

One reason is that our definition must imply that «if» is not a singular term.

The preceding, then, are two requirements we would want satisfied by any interpretation of «acceptable sentence» which is used in defining «singular term».

Quine must accept both. Otherwise his definition would be incor-

rect. For if he does not accept the first, then (D) would be circular. If he does not accept the second, then (D) would incorrectly find an expression like «if» to be a singular term.

Keeping both requirements in mind, compare (1) and (3). Two respects in which they are alike are these: (i) both can be obtained from (2), and (ii) most fluent speakers find them to be odd.

The difference between (1) and (3) is this. In (1) a singular term («this stone») occurs where a non-singular term («if») occurs in (3). Consequently they can be distinguished only by the use of a certain concept. It is one which means the same as «singular term». In this respect, then, the concept of singular term is required in order to distinguish between the two sentences. It follows that when defining «singular term» we must take (1) to be unacceptable.

The result of taking (1) to be acceptable shows this. Namely, (D) would be circular. For consider any interpretation of «acceptable sentence» which finds sentences like (3) unacceptable but not those like (1). It distinguishes between them. Consequently this interpretation would require the concept «singular term». Suppose we used the interpretation in our definition of «singular term». It would be circular.

In summary, my argument is this. Suppose we want to take (1) to be acceptable. We would be distinguishing it from (3). This can be done only by using the concept «singular term». Therefore in order for our definition of «singular term» not to be circular, we must take (1) to be unacceptable.

This conclusion results in counter-examples to (D). For we followed (D) in arriving at (1). That is, we substituted the expression «this stone» for the free variable in the open sentence «x is thinking about Vienna». We have established that according to the type of interpretation of «acceptable sentence» we must use in defining «singular term», the resulting sentence (i.e. (1)) is unacceptable.([4]) Consequently it incorrectly follows from (D) that «this stone» is not a singular term.

This can be shown to follow from (D) for *every* singular term. The reason is that, as the preceding discussion illustrates, any pair of sentences with the following three characteristics provides a counter-example to (D): (i) Both sentences can be obtained from the same open sentence, (ii) most fluent speakers would find both to be odd,

and (iii) in one a singular term occurs in the grammatical position in which a non-singular term occurs in the other. There are many of these pairs of sentences for every singular term.

For example, take «the closed door» and «Betty». The following two pairs can be used to show that they provide counter-examples to (D):

> The closed door is open.
> Very is open.

> Betty but not Betty is tall.
> Betty but not however is tall.

For both members of these pairs have the three characteristics mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Consequently the only way we can differentiate between them is by using the concept of singular term. Suppose in (D) we used an interpretation of «acceptable sentence» which found the first members of each pair acceptable and the second not. It would be differentiating between them and thus using the concept of singular term. This would result in (D) being circular. So we must use an interpretation of «acceptable sentence» which finds «The closed door is open» and «Betty but not Betty is tall» to be unacceptable. These sentences can be obtained by substituting «the closed door» and «Betty» for the free variables in «x is open» and «Betty but not x is tall». So it would follow from (D) that «the closed door» and «Betty» were not singular terms. They are. Hence (D) is not correct.

II. Simplicity and (1)

Unlike us, Quine takes (1) to be acceptable.([5]) His reason is that this will result in a simpler grammar. The point he does not recognize is that this also results in his definition of «singular term» being circular.

In response to Quine's claim that we should take (1) to be acceptable, there are two points I want to establish. One is that when defining «singular term», the desirability of a simpler grammar is not sufficient to justify us in taking a sentence like (1) to be acceptable.

The other is that our taking it to be unacceptable is compatible with Quine's taking it to be acceptable *when* his concern is to arrive at a grammar.

To see the first point, note that there are acceptable sentences which can be obtained from the same open sentences as (1). Examples are «The boy is thinking about Vienna» and «Lisa is thinking about Vienna». A grammar which did not distinguish (1) from these would be simpler than one which did. ([6]) Quine suggests that there should be two factors which determine the class of acceptable sentences:
(i) Sentences whose utterance does not elicit «bizarness reactions» and (ii) «simplicity of the laws whereby we describe and extrapolate» from the sentences mentioned in (i). ([7]) Considerations of simplicity, then, can provide motivation for using an interpretation of «acceptable sentence» which would find (1) acceptable.

However in defining «singular term» the need to avoid a circular definition overrides these considerations. ([8]) For we want our interpretation to find sentences like (3) unacceptable. We saw that any interpretation which does but finds sentences like (1) acceptable begs the question of what is a singular term. We can use an interpretation of «acceptable sentence» which begs this question only if we have already answered it. We have not.

Note that defining «singular term» is independent from arriving at a grammar. The definition comes first. ([9]) Hence our taking (1) to be unacceptable in order to define «singular term» does not imply that Quine is mistaken when he takes it to be acceptable in attempting to establish a grammar. Where he is mistaken is in thinking he can use the same interpretation for both tasks.

So for accomplishing some other task such as arriving at a grammar, simplicity may provide sufficient justification for taking (1) to be acceptable. However for defining «singular term» it does not.

Therefore Quine's approach should be this. When he attempts to define «singular term» use an interpretation of «acceptable sentence» which finds sentences like (1) unacceptable. Then when he is concerned with establishing a grammar, use one which does not. He must not use the same interpretation for both. The reason is that if he does then either his definition will be circular or his grammar could be simpler.

III. Summary

In summary, these sentences containing a free variable are acceptable:

> x is thinking about Vienna.
> x is open.
> Betty but not x is tall.

But as we have shown, when defining «singular term» we must take these to be unacceptable:

> This stone is thinking about Vienna.
> The closed door is open.
> Betty but not Betty is tall.

This establishes the feature of singular terms which has not been recognized: When it comes to defining «singular term», the structure of a singular term is not the same as that of a free variable's. In (D) Quine assumed that it was. Another way of putting this point is that a singular term is not substitutable into every open sentence, only a certain type. So before «singular term» can be defined it must be determined what this type is. This shows that any successful attempt to provide a syntactic characterization of what is a singular term is not going to be as straightforward as is generally assumed.

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(¹) When I speak of a singular term I will always have this kind in mind. Unless indicated otherwise, all works mentioned are by Quine.

(²) *Methods of Logic*, 3rd. ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1972), p. 219.

(³) Or one synonymous with it.

(⁴) (1) violates what Chomsky calls a «selectional rule». See his *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1965), p. 149.

(⁵) *Philosophy of Logic* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 21.

(⁶) *Philosophy of Logic*, pp. 20-22; and *Words and Objections*, Davidson and Hintikka, eds. (Dordrecht-Holland: D. Reidel, 1969), p. 328.

(⁷) *From a Logical Point of View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 54.

(⁸) Quine has stressed the need to avoid circular definitions. For instance, in discussing defining a grammatical category he argues: «Can we repair the definition by limiting the interchanges to positions where (unlike 'lane' in 'plane') the word figures as constituent of a grammatical construction? No, we are then caught in a circle; the notion of construction depends on that of category, and so cannot be used in defining it» (*Philosophy of Logic*, pp. 18 and 19).

Our reasoning is similar: In order to find a sentence like (1) acceptable, we need an interpretation of «acceptable sentence» which depends on the notion of singular term, and so cannot be used in defining it.

(⁹) *Philosophy of Logic*, p. 17.