Synthese (2025) 206:19
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-025-05100-9

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Complex names

Seungtaek Lee[1]

Received: 29 July 2024 / Accepted: 28 May 2025

Abstract

This paper identifies a class of expressions that have long remained on the margins of theoretical discussion, such as 'Professor Russell', 'Stanford University', 'Mount Everest', and 'Iguazu Falls'. These expressions, which I call "complex names," combine a simple proper name with a descriptor (e.g. 'Professor', 'University', 'Mount', 'Falls') to form a structured referential term. Complex names designate the same individual as the simple name they contain, while conveying a specific piece of information about that individual via the embedded descriptor. The aim of the paper is to draw attention to these underexplored names, highlight their unique semantic challenges, and develop a general framework for their analysis. First, I demonstrate that the information encoded in complex names is best understood as a presupposition, rather than as a conversational or conventional implicature. Next, I critically examine descriptivist accounts that treat complex names as a kind of definite description and argue that complex names pattern more closely with simple, standard names. Finally, I sketch an account on which complex names are analyzed as structured presupposition triggers, syntactically built up from simple names and presuppositional descriptors in a hierarchical, template-governed manner.

Keywords Proper names · Definite descriptions · Reference · Millianism · Predicativism

✉ Seungtaek Lee
stlee@ucla.edu

[1] Department of Philosophy, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Published online: 25 June 2025

1 Introduction

Orthodoxy has it that proper names are devices for direct reference.[1] A proper name "*simply* refers to its bearer and has no other linguistic function … [T]he linguistic function of a proper name is completely exhausted by the fact that it names its bearer" (Kripke, 2011[1979]: 126–127). Like a tag or label, a proper name has no meaning that determines or restricts its application or reference.[2] For comparison, consider the common noun 'ophthalmologist'. It has a meaning—*eye doctor*—that determines its range of application. Its meaning picks out all and only individuals to whom the term applies. Similarly, the pronoun 'she' has a meaning—*female individual*—that restricts its range of reference. Its meaning constrains the domain of individuals to whom the term refers. In contrast, on the orthodox view, the name 'Aristotle' has no meaning beyond designating its bearer.

Some have objected to this claim on the grounds that names can apply to multiple individuals via some descriptive content, as in cases of the following sort.[3]

1. There was more than one Aristotle in ancient Greece.
2. Some Aristotles were courageous; some were timid.
3. No Aristotle was born before Socrates died.

In these sentences, 'Aristotle' is used as a multiply applicable predicate (specifically, as a count noun) with its meaning to be *individual named 'Aristotle'*. Opponents of the orthodox view argue that such cases exemplify the primary use of names and that names have meanings that pick out all and only individuals who bear those names.

A major challenge for this approach is to explain how names as predicates can have typical referential uses.[4] Predicates, in themselves, are not referential; without a syntactic supplement such as a definite article, they are either ungrammatical (e.g. 'I like *(the) ophthalmologist') or denote some abstract kind (e.g. 'I like lamb'). However, names, in their typical uses, do not require a determiner; nor are their bare occurrences generally interpreted as kind-denoting. For instance, 'Aristotle was a philosopher' is not understood as 'Aristotle*ness* was a philosopher'.[5]

The focus of this paper is on a different set of linguistic data that challenges the orthodox view, namely, names such as 'Professor Russell', 'Stanford University', 'Mount Everest', and 'Iguazu Falls'. We might call such expressions *complex names*. Complex names are structured referential terms in which a proper name (e.g. 'Russell', 'Stanford', 'Everest', 'Iguazu') is combined with a sortal count noun—or what

[1] The term 'direct reference' is ambiguous (Martí, 2003). In one sense, a singular term is directly referential if it contributes only an individual to truth conditions, therefore counting indexicals as direct referential terms (Kaplan, 1989: 497). Another sense requires reference without mediation by descriptive meaning, thus excluding indexicals. I use the term in this second sense.

[2] Alternatively, the meaning of a proper name is exhausted by its reference.

[3] See *inter alia* Sloat (1969), Burge (1973), Bach (2002), Elbourne (2005), Matushansky (2008), and Fara (2015).

[4] Of course, the opposite challenge arises for referentialist, who believe the primary use of names is referential. See Leckie (2013), Jeshion (2015), Delgado (2019), and Lee (2020b) for responses.

[5] See Delgado (2022) for this line of criticism.

I call a *descriptor* (e.g. 'Professor', 'University', 'Mount', 'Falls')—which indicates the status or category of the referent. Though word order and the omissibility of the descriptor may vary,[6] a key feature of complex names is that their descriptors are often omissible but semantically active when present, and more specifically, presuppositional—or so I will argue.[7] Since complex names appear in argument positions, they present a distinct challenge from that of predicative names.

Complex names are structured names—or more neutrally, constructions that contain names—but the reverse does not necessarily hold. Consider *close appositives*, such as 'the poet Burns', 'the planet Venus', and 'the year 1984' (Rieppel, 2021). Like complex names, close appositives (i) exhibit strict syntactic constraints, (ii) designate the same individual as the name they contain, and (iii) convey a specific piece of information about that individual via the embedded sortal count noun. However, there are also important differences: (iv) close appositives obligatorily carry the definite article 'the', (v) they allow more syntactic and compositional flexibility (e.g. 'the famous faculty member Russell' vs. #'Famous Faculty Member Russell'), and (vi) whereas close appositives clearly function as definite descriptions and tend to encode information at the at-issue level, complex names function as referential terms and tend to encode information at the not-at-issue level—more on this below.

Another subset of structured names involves *capitalised descriptions*, such as 'the Holy Roman Empire', 'the Mississippi River', 'the Space Needle', and 'the Parthenon' (Rabern, 2015). These noun phrases can be divided into two categories: those in which the sortal count noun retains its ordinary meaning (e.g. 'the Mississippi River') and those in which it does not (e.g. 'the Space Needle'). Both types can be analyzed as combinations of the definite article 'the' and a capitalised nominal (e.g. 'Mississippi River' or 'Space Needle'). An important difference is that in the first category, the capitalised nominal has internal structure (e.g. ['Mississippi' + 'River']), whereas in the second, it functions as a single semantic unit or "word-with-spaces" (e.g. ['Space Needle']). As we will see in § 3, noun phrases of the first sort share several key characteristics with complex names, and we might reasonably call them *quasi-complex names*: (i) quasi-complex names permit an optional descriptor (e.g. 'the Mississippi'); (ii) they resist substitution of their descriptor with a (near-)synonym (e.g. #'the Mississippi Waterway'); (iii) they are naturally understood as rigid

[6] Geographical names like 'Mount Everest' and 'Lake Tahoe' exhibit a higher degree of lexicalization, making their descriptors more resistant to omission. Moreover, unlike titles added to personal names, their descriptors are integrated into the entire phrases from the outset and may later be dropped. Thus, these names might need distinct treatment, despite their strict formation rules. A comparison might be drawn with Icelandic personal naming practices, where surnames are derived from the first name of the father or mother—structurally similar to (but not identical to) how 'Johnson' in English originally signified 'son of John'. While such naming practices might give rise to presuppositional meanings in ways similar to complex names, this would imply that seemingly simple multi-word names like 'Bertrand Russell' should also count as complex names, with 'Russell' indicating the referent's membership in a family. These observations raise important issues that go beyond the scope of this paper. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this aspect.

[7] Therefore, as noted in § 3, this terminology differs from Matushansky's (2008), according to which any multi-word names count as complex names, including 'Bertrand Russell'. I reserve the term only for names with descriptors that encode specific information by virtue of a linguistic convention governing their formation.

designators; and (iv) they are not readily interchangeable with supposedly equivalent definite descriptions (e.g. 'the river named 'Mississippi'').

It is true that quasi-complex names exhibit notable differences that should not be overlooked: (v) they obligatorily take the definite article 'the', though this requirement is relaxed in certain cases (e.g. bridge names); (vi) they allow for some degree of adjective interposition (e.g. 'the mighty Mississippi River'); and (vii) their descriptors can serve as anchors of 'one'-anaphora (e.g. 'When the Brooklyn Bridge is blocked, use the Manhattan one'; cf. Rabern, 2015: 312). These differences raise the question of whether such phrases should be classified as complex names. However, unlike close appositives, quasi-complex names combine a proper name with a descriptor to form a referential term for a specific entity rather than a definite description. This referentiality, along with the optional presuppositional descriptor, provides a compelling reason to treat them as part of the complex name category. That said, this classification won't substantially affect the overall argument, as our primary focus will remain on *bona fide* complex names such as 'Professor Russell'.

This paper aims to draw attention to these underexplored names, show their unique semantic challenges, and propose a general framework for their analysis. § 2 introduces a skeptical concern and potential responses on behalf of the orthodox view, demonstrating that the information encoded in complex names behaves much like a presupposition. § 3 critically examines descriptivist accounts, which treat complex names as some sort of definite description, and argues that complex names should not be assimilated to definite descriptions. § 4 outlines the ways in which complex names are analyzed as structured presupposition triggers within a hierarchical syntactic structure, wherein complex names are built up from simple names and presuppositional descriptors. § 5 concludes.

2 The information in complex names

On the surface, complex names are not devoid of meaning. For example, 'Professor Russell' and 'Doctor Russell' appear to convey distinct information, even if they are coreferential. This is particularly salient when we compare complex names with their simple counterparts. Consider the following examples:

4. Professor Russell attended the party. So, at least one professor attended the party.
5. Russell attended the party.?/#So, at least one professor attended the party.[8]

The key observation is that certain inferences are licensed when drawn from complex names but not from simple ones. Suppose, in each case, someone infers the second

[8] Strictly, the infelicity symbol (#) before 'So' in (5) is not fully justified. In a context where the referent's being a professor is common ground, the inference is perfectly acceptable—just as 'Donald Trump attended the party; so at least one American attended the party' does not necessarily sound infelicitous. Thus, both (4) and (5) might be judged acceptable, though for different reasons. I have no objection to this interpretation—what I wish to underscore is that in (4), the second sentence follows solely from the literal content of the first (given its presuppositional meaning—see below), whereas in (5), it does not. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for prompting this clarification

statement from the first without knowing who is referred to by that name (e.g. when reviewing a list of party attendees). Intuitively, the inference in (4) is acceptable because 'Professor Russell' indicates that the referent is a professor; whereas the inference in (5) is not, since 'Russell' lacks the same implication.

Two potential responses to this observation present themselves. The first is to deny that (4) and (5) have any significant difference that bears on the semantics or pragmatics of names. On this view, whenever the inference in (5) is invalid or unacceptable, so is that in (4)—there's no need for a distinct category of complex names. For example, consider 'Professor Longhair', the stage name of a jazz musician.[9] An analogous inference would be erroneous, as the musician was not actually a professor. This suggests that expressions of the form ['Professor' + surname] do not inherently convey that the referent is a professor. Thus, the linguistic function of 'Professor Russell' would be purely referential.

However, first, the mere existence of simple names whose form mimics the structure of complex names does not preclude the category of complex names. Nearly any form of phrase can be used as a simple name—for example, adjectives ('Frank'), verbs ('Hope'), adverbs ('Lively'), common nouns ('King'), pronouns ('She'), definite descriptions ('The Big Apple'), and even sentences ('I Can't Believe It's Not Butter').[10] This does not prevent us from treating these categories differently.

Second, more importantly, this skeptical response struggles to account for certain observations. Fake complex names appear to exploit the conventions governing official ones—for instance, the requirement that only a qualified individual is granted the title 'Professor' and is entitled to be addressed as 'Professor + [surname]'. The assignment of such titles follows strict procedural norms. Stage names that mimic title-bearing phrases—such as 'Professor Longhair', 'Queen Latifah', and 'Dr. Dre'—are presumably chosen for lexical associations with the authority or status of these titles. Similarly, if someone is nicknamed 'Doctor' due to traits typically associated with doctors (e.g. expertise in a particular field), then those who use the name initially pretend to grant her the title, eventually establishing it as a simple name. Of course, this process differs from cases where someone falsely calls herself a professor with the intent to mislead or deceive, or where others mistakenly address her as such, despite her being, say, a teaching assistant. In such cases—unlike in stage names or nicknames—speakers would likely refuse or cease to call her a professor

[9] This example is from Soames (2002: 111), who defends his theory of *partially descriptive names* (PDNs) from concerns regarding only apparent PDNs like 'Professor Longhair' and 'Queen Latifah': "From a semantic point of view, these stage names are like ordinary (i.e., nondescriptive) proper names; their semantic contents can be identified with their referents. The fact that they have the form of phrases that could be used as genuine PDNs does not prevent them from having a reading in which they are semantically simple." This point is taken up in the next paragraph.

[10] This is not to say that naming practices are entirely unconstrained. On the contrary, name formation often follows specific conventions (see fn.6) and operates within a limited repertoire. For instance, taking a verb for naming is far less conventional than taking a noun for naming. Therefore, as an anonymous reviewer notes, 'Hope' more plausibly originates from the noun 'hope' rather than the verb 'to hope' (much like 'Faith' and 'Victory'). Nevertheless, in some languages like Mohawk, personal names are commonly derived from verb phrases. Moreover, even in English, name givers have considerable discretion in initiating idiosyncratic naming practices—e.g. naming a child 'X Æ A-Xii' (Harrison, 2025). Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for prompting this clarification.

upon recognizing the error. But in any case, merely apparent complex names should be construed as derivative of genuine ones; otherwise, it would be puzzling how they evoke such effects. Similar points apply to institutional descriptors like 'University': only accredited institutions meeting specific criteria are legally permitted to include this descriptor in their names; otherwise, they are subject to legal action requiring a name change.[11,12]

The second response attempts to explain away the contrast between (4) and (5) by appealing to (generalized) conversational implicature (Grice, 1975). The idea is that phrases of the form ['Professor' + surname] are, in normal circumstances, used to convey the information that the referent is a professor, while their semantics does not differ from that of simple names like 'Russell'. Here's an analogy: the old-fashioned dog name 'Fido' in English is almost exclusively used for dogs. As a result, an utterance of 'Fido was in the living room' may generally imply that there is at least one dog in the living room. However, assuming the dog under discussion has another name, 'Peter', a parallel inference involving 'Peter' would be odd or unacceptable, even though 'Fido' and 'Peter' here are coreferential. Likewise, the response goes, the world knowledge about naming practices—specifically, that people acquire names of the form ['Professor' + surname] upon becoming a professor—allows the hearers to infer from 'Professor Russell' that the referent is a professor.

To me, the profession information in 'Professor Russell' seems more lexicalized than the species information in 'Fido'. The former may be required of someone who is to qualify as a competent user of the language, while the latter should not—one is linguistic knowledge, and the other is knowledge *about* language. But this may be difficult to show without begging the question. Instead, I submit that the information in complex names fails to meet the necessary conditions for conversational implicatures. Specifically, it lacks three key features: calculability, reinforceability, and embeddability (Rett, 2020; cf. Potts, 2015).[13]

[11] Trump University is such a case: "New York State law requires that anything calling itself a university must apply, be vetted, have all instructors vetted and then be certified, none of which Trump did. Despite repeated warnings from state education regulators beginning in 2005, Trump persisted in operating out of 40 Wall St. until winding down operations in 2010. That is what allowed the state attorney general to bring his suit." (Brill, 2015). Thanks to Elizabeth Coppock for this interesting example.

[12] Here's another piece of data that poses difficulties for the skeptic: the title 'Professor' in (1*) and (2*) can, at least sometimes, contribute the same meaning to the effect that the person under discussion is a professor.

(1*) Professor Russell is speaking at the podium.

(2*) A Professor Russell is speaking at the podium.

If 'Professor Russell' belonged to the same linguistic category as 'Russell', then (2*) would only be interpreted as 'An individual called 'Professor Russell' is speaking at the podium', given the standard metalinguistic treatment of predicative names. This is not the case. Thanks to Sam Cumming for helpful discussion.

[13] The most well-known test for conversational implicature is cancellability: if a putative conversational implicature p is cancellable explicitly (by saying something contradictory to p) or contextually (by changing the context in a way that p is not accepted), then p is a conversational implicature. But this is a sufficient and not necessary condition, so saying that information in complex names is non-cancellable (as it seems) is not enough to show the inadequacy of the current response. Also, the test is highly sensitive to Question Under Discussion (QUD) (Rett, 2020; cf. van Kuppevelt, 1996).

First, conversational implicature is *calculable*: it is derivable from what is uttered together with general conversational principles and background knowledge. To illustrate, take a typical example:

6. Mary has three kids.

   implicates Mary has exactly three kids.

The implicature in (6) arises from the maxim of quantity, which demands that the speaker provide as much information as required (and no more). The reasoning is that if the speaker were in a position to use a stronger quantity word, e.g. 'four', she would do so; but because she didn't, she must believe that the stronger word doesn't apply. The term 'three' therefore generally triggers an implicature to the effect that 'exactly three' holds. The implication in (4), however, is not calculated from conversational maxims. The maxims of quantity and quality clearly do not help; nor does the maxim of relation, as the implication remains in a context where the profession information is irrelevant. What about manner implicature? Canonical examples of manner implicature are cases where an utterance is not perspicuous as the speaker wants to remain non-committal, mask her message, or describe the situation as atypical. However, the information triggered by the complex name in (4) does not involve perspicuity. Therefore, none of the Gricean maxims serves to differentiate (4) from (5). This suggests that we should treat the information in complex names as something else, e.g. lexical presupposition or conventional implicature.

Second, conversational implicature is *reinforceable*: reiterating it causes no redundancy. If a speaker utters p to conversationally implicate q, then she can confirm the implicature by following p with q. For instance, a speaker can reinforce her utterance of 'Mary has three kids' by adding 'exactly three'. The same doesn't hold for entailment or presupposition. It is redundant to reiterate what is entailed (#'Mary has three kids, and she has kids') or presupposed (#'Mary's kids are asleep, and she has kids'). An attempt to reinforce what is encoded in a complex name gives rise to redundancy (#'Professor Russell attended the party, and he is a professor'), whereas its simple counterpart is perfectly acceptable and informative ('Russell attended the party, and he is a professor'). This shows that inferences involving complex names are more similar to entailments or presuppositions than conversational implicatures.

Third, conversational implicature is *embeddable*: it allows for a local interpretation within the scope of an embedded clause like the antecedent of a conditional. A conversational implicature is interpreted locally if the whole sentence is understood as saying what is true just in case the implicature is incorporated into the embedded clause. For instance, the sentence 'If Mary has three kids, then the oldest is a boy' is true, when interpreted locally, just in case if Mary has exactly three kids, then the oldest is a boy. The same doesn't hold for presuppositions. A presupposition in a conditional antecedent projects out: 'If Mary's kids are asleep, then the oldest is in the bedroom' doesn't have the same meaning as 'If Mary has kids and they are asleep, then the oldest is in the bedroom'. A parallel behavior is observed for the information in complex names: 'If Professor Russell attended the party, then he enjoyed it' is not interpreted as 'If Russell is a professor and he attended the party, then he enjoyed it'.

Importantly, other embeddings like negations, interrogatives, or modals produce the same effects. For instance, the sentence 'It is not the case that Professor Russell attended the party' does not deny the referent's being a professor. Given that these semantic operators—known as *presupposition holes* (Karttunen, 1973; cf. Beaver et al., 2024)—provide standard diagnostics for presuppositions, this observation strongly suggests that the information in a complex name is instead a presupposition.[14] Of course, it is premature to draw any definitive conclusion. Alternative explanations must be considered. In the next section, I will examine the descriptivist claim that complex names are some sort of definite description.

Before proceeding, however, we should consider another implicature approach. We have seen that the information in complex names is non-calculable (so conventional rather than conversational), non-reinforceable (so asserted or presupposed), and non-embeddable (so projects out of operators). To preserve these features, one might suggest, all we need is to appeal to *conventional* implicature.[15] Meaning p is a conventional implicature of phrase S iff p is an encoded property of a lexical item or construction in S, p is implied by S, and p's truth or falsity has no effect on the at-issue, truth-conditional meaning of S (Potts, 2015: 186). A classic example is the contrastive meaning of 'but'. If someone says, "Rob is rich but kind," she implies that being rich and being kind are typically incompatible, but the truth-condition remains that Rob is both rich and kind. Another, more relevant example involves nonrestrictive, or "loose," appositives:

7. Russell, a philosophy professor, attended the party.

   conventionally implicates Russell is a philosophy professor.

In the first sentence of (7), the phrase 'a philosophy professor' contributes the conventional implicature of the referent's being a philosophy professor, and this information is neither reinforceable nor embeddable. Repeating it would be infelicitous for redundancy (#'Russell, a philosophy professor, attended the party, and he is a philosophy professor'), and embedding it under a negation or a conditional antecedent would fail ('It is not the case that Russell, a philosophy professor, attended the party' does not imply that Russell is not a philosophy professor).

This account may seem promising, as it would straightforwardly differentiate the contrast between (4) and (5) by treating 'Professor Russell' as 'Russell, who is a professor' or 'Russell, a professor', with 'Russell' being a standard, nondescriptive name. However, closer examination reveals that the hope is misguided. Firstly,

[14] The test is also known as the family of sentences test (Chierchia & McConnell-Ginet, 1990), using a family of entailment-canceling environments. Another popular diagnostic is the so-called "Hey, Wait a Minute" test (von Fintel, 2004; cf. Shanon, 1976): If p presupposes q, and q wasn't established prior to the speaker's utterance of p, then the hearer can legitimately make a complaint by using specialized devices that disrupt the flow of the conversation (e.g. "Mary's brother is very funny." "Hey, wait a minute. I didn't know that Mary had a brother!"). The information in complex names passes this test as well (e.g. "Professor Russell attended the party." "Hey, wait a minute. I didn't know that Russell was a professor!").

[15] This proposal shouldn't be confused with the conventional implicature view about honorifics. For example, one might think of the honorific meaning in the title 'Professor' (i.e. the speaker indicates respect for the individual being referred to) as a conventional implicature (Potts & Kawahara, 2004; McCready, 2010). But this is clearly not the sort of meaning under discussion.

conventional implicatures—especially the kind couched in appositives—introduce novel information and therefore follow what Potts (2005) calls the *anti-backgrounding requirement*: if a conventional implicature is used to convey information already known to the hearer, the result is infelicity due to redundancy, as in (8). In contrast, a presupposition may utilize backgrounded content, as in (9). Complex names pattern with presuppositions, as in (10).

8. Lance Armstrong survived cancer. #When reporters interview Lance, a cancer survivor, he often talks about the disease. (Potts, 2005: 112)
9. Mary Smith has a brother. When reporters interview Mary's brother, he often talks about his family.
10. Bertrand Russell was a philosophy professor. When reporters interviewed Professor Russell, he often talked about philosophy.

Moreover, unlike presuppositions, conventional implicatures are not filtered out even when their content appears in a conditional antecedent. For example, in (11), the conventional implicature remains active, despite being embedded in a conditional antecedent. In contrast, as in (12), the presupposition is suspended in the same environment. Again, complex names pattern with presuppositions, as in (13).

11. #If Armstrong did win the 2003 Tour, then Lance Armstrong, the 2003 Tour winner, is training. (Potts, 2005: 111)
12. If Mary has a brother, then Mary's brother is running.
13. If Russell is a professor, then Professor Russell is teaching.

Lastly, it is not entirely clear whether the falsity of the implied content of a complex name has no effect on the truth-value of the asserted content. Imagine that Jones is not a professor and attended the party under discussion. In this case, it might not be unreasonable to think that the assertive content of 'Jones, who is a professor, attended the party' is false, whereas 'Professor Jones attended the party' fails to express a proposition—presumably because 'Jones' has a semantic reference, whereas 'Professor Jones' only has a speaker reference.[16] If this is so, it reveals another difference between nonrestrictive appositives and complex names.

The discussion so far suggests that the information in complex names is best understood as a presupposition. Inferences like (4) exemplify what is known as *Strawson entailment*, which von Fintel (1999) defines as follows: p strawson-entails q iff the conjunction of p and p's presuppositions logically entails q. For instance, 'Professor Russell attended the party' strawson-entails 'At least one professor attended the party' because 'Professor Russell attended the party, and Professor Russell is a professor' entails 'At least one professor attended the party'. The inference in (4) is thus analogous to the inference from 'Jane stopped smoking' to 'Jane used to smoke'. This motivates analyzing complex names as presupposition triggers. However, their pre-

[16] It depends on how to construe presupposition failure. One approach treats such *misnomers* as lacking a semantic reference, while another views them as contributing incorrect not-at-issue content. More on this in § 4.

cise place within the broader semantic landscape remains undetermined. An important question is whether complex names should be classified as a sort of definite description, given that definite descriptions are also sometimes treated as presupposition triggers. We now turn to descriptivist accounts to examine this possibility.

3 Are complex names definite descriptions?

From the standpoint of descriptivism, paradigm cases of complex names are those with a definite article (e.g. 'the Eiffel Tower', 'the River Thames', 'the Atlantic Ocean'), rather than those without an (overt) definite article (e.g. 'Professor Russell', 'Stanford University', 'Lake Tahoe'). Between these are names of bridges, whose definite article is optional (e.g. '(the) George Washington Bridge'; cf. Cumming, 2023). Taking these into account, it might appear reasonable to posit that complex names carry a definite article, either overtly or covertly. Treating complex names as definite descriptions would then provide a unified, comprehensive account.

Suppose we adapt the metalinguistic account of ordinary names (§ 1), analyzing non-descriptor nouns in complex names as metalinguistic predicates. For instance, 'the River Thames' would be understood as a compositional phrase, whose meaning is determined by three components: a definite article, an ordinary predicate ('river'), and a metalinguistic predicate ('Thames'). The outcome is semantically equivalent to 'the river named 'Thames''.[17] Likewise, the descriptivist suggests, 'Lake Tahoe' is analyzed as 'the lake named 'Tahoe'', assuming it carries an unpronounced definite article. On this approach, the semantic value of the whole phrase is compositionally determined by a (covert) definite article, an ordinary predicate ('lake'), and a metalinguistic predicate ('Tahoe').

We can articulate the lexical entries for these phrases in the framework of formal semantics due to Heim and Kratzer (1998) (where '$\varnothing_{\text{the}}$' represents an unpronounced definite article).[18,19]

[17] As noted in § 1, Rabern (2015) considers a similar analysis for capitalised descriptions. On this approach, what I call quasi-complex names (e.g. 'the Mississippi River') are analyzed as containing both an ordinary predicate ('River') and a metalinguistic predicate ('Mississippi'); therefore, 'the Mississippi River' is analyzed as 'the river named 'Mississippi''. In contrast, other capitalised descriptions (e.g. 'the Morning Star') are analyzed as containing only a multi-word metalinguistic predicate ('Morning Star'); therefore, 'the Morning Star' is analyzed as 'the bearer of 'Morning Star''. However, Rabern's goal was neither to advocate this treatment for complex names nor to analyze noun phrases without a definite article.

[18] An iota-expression of the form $[\iota x.P(x)]$ denotes a unique individual satisfying P if there is exactly one such individual; otherwise, undefined. While this assumes the Fregean analysis of the definite article, the objections to follow in § 3 do not hinge on this assumption.

[19] For simplicity, I suppress other parameters such as context c, assignment g, and time t throughout.

14. $[\![\text{the River Thames}]\!]^{w}$ $= [\![\text{the}]\!]^{w}([\![\text{River Thames}]\!]^{w})$ *by FA*

$= [\![\text{the}]\!]^{w}([\![\text{River}]\!]^{w}([\![\text{Thames}]\!]^{w}))$ *by PM*

$= [\iota x_{e}.\ x \text{ is a river in } w \ \&\ x \text{ bears the name 'Thames' in } w]$

15. $[\![\emptyset_{\text{the}} \text{ Lake Tahoe}]\!]^{w}$ $= [\![\emptyset_{\text{the}}]\!]^{w}([\![\text{Lake Tahoe}]\!]^{w})$ *by FA*

$= [\![\emptyset_{\text{the}}]\!]^{w}([\![\text{Lake}]\!]^{w}([\![\text{Tahoe}]\!]^{w}))$ *by PM*

$= [\iota x_{e}.\ x \text{ is a lake in } w \ \&\ x \text{ bears the name 'Tahoe' in } w]$

This proposal clearly distinguishes between (4) and (5): 'Professor Russell' is a disguised definite description—equivalent to 'the professor named 'Russell''—which licenses the inference in (4). In contrast, 'Russell' lacks any descriptive content and thus does not have the same implication.

Matushansky (2008) considers a similar analysis in claiming that complex names like 'Miss Alice Liddell' support the metalinguistic view that proper nouns function as name-bearing predicates. With the covert definite article assumption, Matushansky analyzes 'Miss Alice Liddell' as 'the miss who is called Alice Liddell' (604). Notably, she goes further and takes any multi-word names—including 'Alice Liddell' (596)—as intersective predicates with a hidden determiner. In effect, 'Alice Liddell' is equivalent to 'the individual who is called Alice and also called Liddell'. On her view, both 'Miss Alice Liddell' and 'Alice Liddell' are labeled as "complex (proper) names," a classification that differs from the usage we have adopted thus far.

Some clarifications are in order. First, one need not treat 'Alice Liddell' as an intersective predicate to maintain that 'Miss Alice Liddell' functions as a (disguised) definite description. For descriptivists, 'Alice Liddell' can be a semantic atom. A strictly compositional analysis would indeed make the wrong prediction that 'Alice Liddell' is equivalent to 'Liddell Alice'.[20] Second, it may be theoretically unappealing to classify all multi-word names under a single category. For instance, 'the World Cup' does not seem to share the same semantic structure as 'the River Thames'. As noted in § 1, structured names of the latter sort (namely, quasi-complex names) may exhibit stronger semantic or pragmatic affinities with 'Lake Tahoe' than with 'the World Cup'. Third, the objections that follow do not hinge on these two points. Rather, they arise from the observation that, in many contexts, complex names and

[20] This is not to suggest that the view predicts that whenever 'Alice Liddell' is syntactically well-formed, 'Liddell Alice' must also be. Rather, the prediction is that as long as we have two names consisting of the same proper nouns but in reversed order (e.g. 'James Thomas' and 'Thomas James'), they must be semantically equivalent. As an anonymous reviewer rightly points out, compositionality does not generally entail syntactic exchangeability. Furthermore, syntactic differentiation—such as distinguishing between the first name 'Alice' and the surname 'Alice' (and the surname 'Liddell' and the first name 'Liddell')—may allow the view to circumvent this prediction. This is not implausible (and indeed theoretically fruitful for understanding complex names—see § 4). As the reviewer observes, in some languages like German, the order of first and last names may vary by country (e.g. 'Freundlich Otto' in Austria and 'Otto Freundlich' in Germany). Similarly, in English, foreigners' first and last names are sometimes used in both orders (e.g. 'Jong-un Kim' and 'Kim Jong-un'). Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for prompting this clarification.

their putative counterparts are not readily interchangeable. With this in mind, we now turn to objections.

The first objection involves rigidity. Since Kripke (1980), it has been widely held—particularly among philosophers—that definite descriptions, unlike proper names, give rise to *de re/de dicto* ambiguities. Compare 'Aristotle might not have been the teacher of Alexander' and 'The teacher of Alexander might not have been the teacher of Alexander'. The former is unambiguously true, as it permits only a *de re* interpretation: it is true iff there is a possible circumstance where the actual teacher of Alexander (i.e. Aristotle) did not teach Alexander. In contrast, according to the influential philosophical lore, the latter can be read as false, as it allows for a *de dicto* interpretation: it is true iff there is a possible circumstance where some unique individual who taught Alexander did not teach Alexander. If complex names are definite descriptions, we should expect them to exhibit similar *de re/de dicto* ambiguities. But consider the following pairs:

16. President Trump might not have been the president named 'Trump'.
17. The president named 'Trump' might not have been the president named 'Trump'.
18. Caesar might not have crossed the Rubicon River.
19. Caesar might not have crossed the river named 'Rubicon'.

If 'President Trump' and 'the president named 'Trump'' are semantically equivalent, (16) and (17) must have the same truth conditions. However, it seems much more difficult—if not impossible—to get a false reading of (16), compared to (17), where someone other than the actual president named 'Trump' (i.e. Donald Trump) was the president named 'Trump' *and* was not the president named 'Trump'. Similarly, if 'the Rubicon River' and 'the river named 'Rubicon'' are semantically equivalent, (18) and (19) must have the same truth conditions. However, as Rabern (2015: 314) notes, the *de dicto* reading is far more accessible in (19) than in (18), according to which "what is claimed to be possible is that some other river was the unique bearer of 'Rubicon' and Caesar did not cross it, although perhaps he did cross the shallow river in northeastern Italy."

One might attempt to explain the rigidity of complex names by appealing to Fara's (2015: 97ff.) suggestion that names in argument positions are incomplete descriptions, which are supposedly rigid within a context. On her view, names are multiply applicable predicates; therefore, when used referentially (with a covert determiner), they behave as incomplete descriptions, on a par with 'the party'. Moreover, according to Fara, 'the party' in 'Olga might have enjoyed the party' permits only a *de re* reading: once the description receives its semantic value from context, it can only be used referentially, not attributively. After rejecting strategies that assimilate incomplete descriptions to complete ones—e.g. taking 'the party' as elliptical for 'the party that I went to last night'—Fara maintains that her response can piggyback on any account of the rigidity of incomplete descriptions. If this is right, descriptivists about complex names could adopt it to address the modal objection.

However, Fara's proposal has been questioned by Schoubye (2017) for the following reason. Incomplete descriptions do have attributive uses, e.g. when used to designate certain roles. For example, if someone asks her assistant to prepare a party

and says, "The party should have excellent wine,"[21] then 'the party' here can be attributive, provided that the speaker has no specific party in mind. Likewise, if Olga returns home from a party looking hungover, and her friend says, "Olga must have enjoyed the party!", without having a particular party in mind, then 'the party' here should be attributive. In such cases, 'the party' does not refer to a specific party and must therefore take narrow scope with respect to the modal. That is, these utterances must be read *de dicto*, under which the denotation of 'the party' varies across possible worlds, rendering the description non-rigid.[22]

Indeed, definite descriptions—whether complete or incomplete—can be used generically to designate roles or kinds. For example, 'The president lives in the White House' can be used to make a statement about the office of the president, while 'The tiger is carnivorous' can be interpreted as a generalization about members of a natural kind. This brings us to a second context where complex names and definite descriptions diverge. Imagine that U.S. lawmakers propose a bill—perhaps to prevent political dynasties—that bars individuals with the same surname as a former president from running for office. A journalist might say (20) to report on this proposed law, using the current president's surname to illustrate its effect. However, (21) would sound odd for the very same purpose, as 'President Trump' is more readily interpreted as referring to a specific person rather than as a general placeholder for a hypothetical future president named 'Trump'.

20. In the United States, we won't be able to see the president named 'Trump' in the White House anymore—whoever they might be.
21. ?In the United States, we won't be able to see President Trump in the White House anymore—whoever they might be.

Similarly, we can imagine a tourist visiting South Korea, where many cities have a mountain named 'Namsan'—which literally means *South Mountain* in Korean—with the most famous one located in Seoul. Without knowing this name's origin, the tourist might excitedly conclude that every mountain named 'Namsan' in that country is south of a city.[23] To share this surprising discovery, the tourist might say (22). In contrast, (23) would sound odd, as 'Mount Namsan' is more likely to be interpreted as referring to a specific mountain, e.g. the well-known one in Seoul.

22. I'm not sure why, but I figured out that in this country, the mountain named 'Namsan' is always south of a city—isn't that interesting?
23. ?I'm not sure why, but I figured out that in this country, Mount Namsan is always south of a city—isn't that interesting?

The unavailability of generic readings for complex names suggests further contexts in which complex names and their putative counterparts are not easily interchangeable.

[21] This example is from Fara (2015: 103), which she credits to Kent Bach.

[22] See Lee (2020a) for a similar criticism.

[23] In fact, not every Namsan is south of a city, but we can assume that this does not bother the tourist from drawing that conclusion.

A third such context involves covarying interpretations. Definite descriptions can sometimes covary with antecedents containing distributive determiners like 'every' or 'each'. For example, in the sentence 'In every department, the chair holds faculty meetings', the description 'the chair' is naturally interpreted as covarying with the phrase 'every department'. That is, 'the chair' here does not refer to any specific chair but rather to the chair of each department. If complex names are definite descriptions, we should expect them to permit such covarying interpretations. But consider the following pairs:[24]

24. Every theme park engineer in the country maintains the tower named 'Eiffel'.
25. Every theme park engineer in the country maintains the Eiffel Tower.
26. In each meeting, the professor named 'Russell' asked a question.
27. In each meeting, Professor Russell asked a question.

Suppose that every theme park in a given country has exactly one maintenance engineer and exactly one tower named 'Eiffel'. In this scenario, (24) can be used to express that each engineer is responsible for maintaining their own tower that bears the name 'Eiffel'. By contrast, (25) is more naturally understood as stating that all these engineers maintain the famous landmark in France. Similarly, imagine that in every meeting under discussion, there was exactly one professor named 'Russell', and each such professor asked a question during their respective meeting. In this case, (26) accurately depicts this situation, whereas (27) would be more likely interpreted as asserting that one and the same individual asked a question in every meeting.[25]

Fourth, complex names do not serve as antecedents for 'one'-anaphora in their entirety.[26] Suppose we are making a documentary film about professors named 'Russell' and are searching for an interviewee with that name. I met such a professor at a conference and later informed you that we had found an interviewee, but he left before you came. My utterance of (28) would seem perfectly fine, with the definite

[24] Hawthorne and Manley (2012: 236, fn.85) note in passing a very similar point by contrasting the following examples: 'In each city, the river called 'The Thames' is very big' vs. 'In each city, the Thames is very big' (said of a group of cities, each containing a river called 'The Thames'). They suggest that the former is preferred over the latter because, unlike 'the river called 'The Thames'', the phrase 'The Thames' is readily interpreted to designate a specific river.

[25] An anonymous reviewer provided a particularly striking example for this contrast:

(1**) At some of the parties I go to, Professor Russell is also there. But there are also many that he doesn't attend, and quite a few of those have someone else everyone calls 'Professor Russell'.

a. It has happened to me more than once that when coming home from a party, I thought: Professor Russell could have been a friendlier person.

b. It has happened to me more than once that when coming home from a party, I thought: the person referred to as 'Professor Russell' could have been a friendlier person.

In (a), the speaker is clearly thinking about the same individual mentioned in (1**). By contrast, in (b), the speaker is speaking about a different person—someone others called 'Professor Russell' at a party. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer for this helpful example.

[26] This differs from the observation that descriptors can sometimes serve as anchors for 'one'-anaphora (e.g. 'When the Brooklyn Bridge is blocked, use the Manhattan one'; see § 1).

description serving as an antecedent for the 'one'-anaphor. However, (29) would be odd or even ungrammatical and thus could not be used to say the same thing.[27]

28. You're too late. The professor named 'Russell' just left…but maybe another one will show up.
29. You're too late. #Professor Russell just left…but maybe another one will show up.

Notice that similar issues have been raised against descriptivist accounts of simple, standard names. What I have shown is that these problems arise also against descriptivist accounts of complex names. Therefore, we can conclude, these observations reveal not only the discrepancy between complex names and definite descriptions but also the affinity between complex names and simple, standard names.

Yet this conclusion may be premature. Another possibility is to treat non-descriptor nouns in complex names as expressing necessary and uniquely satisfiable properties, such as the property of being identical to a certain individual. Reviving Quine's (1960) analysis, Rieppel (2021) suggests that names are predicates expressing such *identifying* properties. Rieppel's primary concern is with names in a certain construction, namely, a *close appositive* (or a *restrictive appositive*), such as 'the poet Burns'.[28] According to him, a name in a close appositive should be treated neither as a referential name nor as a metalinguistic predicate for the following reasons.

On the one hand, he argues, treating names in close appositives as referential terms leads to a type mismatch. Suppose, for *reductio*, 'Burns' in 'the poet Burns' is a referential term (type *e*). Given that 'the' is standardly assumed of type <<*e*,*t*>,*e*>, and 'the poet Burns' is intuitively of type *e*, the nominal phrase 'poet Burns' is of type <*e*,*t*>. But then 'poet' must be of type <*e*,<*e*,*t*>> (left figure below). This conflicts with the standard assumption that predicates have semantic type <*e*,*t*>. One solution is to take 'Burns' to be a predicate so that it can combine with another predicate via Predicate Modification (right figure below).

On the other hand, he continues, treating names in close appositives as metalinguistic predicates makes a wrong prediction, that close appositives are semantically equivalent to incomplete descriptions. Compare the following analyses:

[27] See King (2006) and Jeshion (2017: 238) for original examples.

[28] It is worth noting that Rieppel's analysis is not designed to account for all kinds of predicative occurrences of names, nor is it intended to address (quasi-)complex names. However, it is unclear whether he would reject extending his analysis to phrases like 'the Columbia River' and 'the Eiffel Tower'. Here, I consider the prospect of a Quinean analysis of (quasi-)complex names.

30. $[\![\text{Burns}]\!]^{w} = [\lambda x_{e}.\ x \text{ bears the name 'Burns' in } w]$ *Metalinguistic analysis*

$[\![\text{the poet Burns}]\!]^{w} = [\iota x_{e}.\ x \text{ is a poet in } w \,\&\, x \text{ bears the name 'Burns' in } w]$

31. $[\![\text{Burns}]\!]^{w} = [\lambda x_{e}.\ x = b]$ *Quinean analysis*

$[\![\text{the poet Burns}]\!]^{w} = [\iota x_{e}.\ x \text{ is a poet in } w \,\&\, x = b]$

(where b is a contextually salient Burns, e.g. Robert Burns)

On the metalinguistic analysis, 'the poet Burns' is an incomplete description, on a par with 'the student' or 'the student parent', as the nominal phrase 'poet Burns' is treated as a multiply applicable predicate. By contrast, on the Quinean analysis, 'the poet Burns' is a complete description, on a par with 'the tallest student' or 'the first woman president', since the nominal phrase serves as a uniquely applicable predicate.

Now, consider that close appositives do not permit determiner selection (e.g. *'a poet Burns') or superlative modification (e.g. *'the tallest poet Burns'). These restrictions are difficult to reconcile with the metalinguistic analysis. If close appositives were incomplete descriptions, then there would be no good reason why these phrases exhibit such behavior. Rieppel (2021: 27), drawing on Jackendoff (1984: 30), proposes that names in close appositives serve to specify which individual in the extension of the sortal noun is at issue, thereby rendering the whole phrase a complete description. This is why, according to Rieppel, replacing the definite article with an indefinite one or further specifying the individual at issue with a superlative adjective produces infelicity.

The Quinean analysis of close appositives seems highly plausible and may offer theoretical resources for descriptivists about complex names to accommodate the observations regarding rigidity, genericity, covariance, and 'one'-anaphora. On this approach, 'Professor Russell' would be analyzed as 'the professor who is identical to the individual r' (where r is a specific person, e.g. Bertrand Russell). Nevertheless, other worries remain due to an underlying assumption of descriptivism—that complex names are fully compositional. Definite descriptions conform to a strict form of compositionality in that their constituents can typically be replaced with (near-)synonyms without changing their denotations. For instance, in the phrase 'the professor with the name 'Russell'', the noun 'professor' can be replaced with 'faculty member' to denote the same individual. In contrast, (quasi-)complex names do not permit such substitutions, as illustrated in (32), suggesting that complex names do not exhibit the same degree of compositionality as standard definite descriptions and thus should not be assimilated to them.[29]

[29] Soames (2005: 175–176) presents essentially the same data points to claim that complex names are syntactically simple. One of his examples is 'Professor Lewis' vs. #'Teacher Lewis'. Soames concludes from the substitution failure that complex names have no syntactic internal structure. I disagree. What these data show is only that complex names should not be given a fully compositional treatment. On my view, complex names are not words-with-spaces; instead, they are *semi-fixed*, i.e. strictly constrained on word order and composition but undergo some degree of lexical variation such as internal modification, pluralization, coordination, and determiner selection, just as idioms and collocations. See Sag et al. (2002) for more on semi-fixity.

32. Professor Russell	#Faculty Member Russell
Stanford University	#Stanford Higher Education Institution
the Eiffel Tower	#the Eiffel Tall Structure
the River Thames	#the Waterway Thames

Furthermore, there is an overgeneration problem: treating complex names as disguised definite descriptions incorrectly predicts the acceptability of ungrammatical or infelicitous constructions. Compositional expressions are generally productive, so if complex names were merely definite descriptions, we would expect phrases like 'the teacher of Wittgenstein who bears the name 'Russell' (or 'the teacher of Wittgenstein who is identical to Russell') to have a well-formed, meaningful counterpart in 'Teacher of Wittgenstein Russell'—a prediction that is clearly not borne out. The same problem arises in the following examples:

33. #Human Russell	#Author of "On Denoting" Russell
#Stanford Famous School in Stanford California	
#the Eiffel Monument	#the Eiffel Cultural Icon of France
#the River Flowing through Southern England Thames	

To be sure, these considerations do not amount to a decisive refutation. The possibility remains open that complex names are idiomatic noun-noun compounds, similar to 'school bus' or 'heart attack', consisting of an ordinary predicate and a name-predicate.[30] Shifting attention from simple names within complex names to descriptors, however, we can ask whether these elements must be seen as standard, ordinary predicates (of type $\langle e,t \rangle$). For example, in English, certain descriptors—or more neutrally, capitalised bare common nouns—have vocative uses. If someone asks, "Are you attending the party, Professor?", the title 'Professor' serves as a term of address. Its primary function is to refer to the interlocutor rather than merely attributing the property of being a professor. A related but distinct phenomenon appears in such languages as Korean, Japanese, and Thai, where professional titles commonly used in complex names also serve as first- and second-person pronouns. In (34), the Korean *seonsaeng* occurs in an argument position to refer to the speaker, while in (35) and (36), the Japanese *sensei* and the Thai *accaan* are used to refer to the hearer.[31]

[30] Still, two issues persist: first, this proposal needs to justify the existence of a covert definite article; second, in light of the discussion in § 2, it is committed to the claim that some noun-noun compounds encode presuppositions or not-at-issue contents, which merits close scrutiny.

[31] See McCready (2019: 82) for (35) and (36). Strictly, both the Korean *seonsaeng* and the Japanese *sensei* mean *teacher* rather than *professor*. Each language has a distinct term for *professor* (*gyosu* in Korean and *kyouju* in Japanese). However, unlike in English, *teacher* in these languages functions both as a title and as an address term (even for a professor). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for prompting this clarification.

34. seonsaeng-nim-un gangyeon-e an gan-da
teacher-HON-TOP talk-to NEG go-END
'Professor is not going to the talk' (Korean)

35. sensei-wa kooen-ni ik-imasu ka
teacher-TOP talk-to go-HON Q
'Is Professor going to the talk?' (Japanese)

36. accaan bpai bapraasai mái khá
teacher go presentation Q HON
'Is Professor going to the talk?' (Thai)

As McCready (2019: 83) suggests, the bare nominals in (34)–(36) resemble referential kinship terms in English (e.g. 'Grandma')[32] rather than standard predicates with an unpronounced definite determiner. Indeed, using a definite description to self-refer or address a hearer would be inappropriate or at least awkward. These observations cast doubt on another implicit descriptivist assumption—that descriptors within complex names have the same semantics as standard predicates.[33]

Instead, I submit, descriptors are better understood as unique syntactic constituents that trigger presuppositions. In the next section, I develop a framework in which the presuppositional meanings of complex names are analyzed within a hierarchical syntactic structure, where complex names are formed from simple names and presuppositional descriptors.

4 Complex names as structured presupposition triggers

Suppose, as I have argued, that complex names carry presuppositional meanings. How should we model this? Following Abrusán (2023), we can distinguish between two approaches to presupposition: the *precondition* approach and the *information-packaging* approach. On the first approach, presuppositions are conceptualized as

[32] Relatedly, Gray (2018) argues that bare kinship terms are referential terms and not disguised descriptions, presenting two pieces of evidence. First, these terms do not license 'one'-anaphora:??'Grandma is in the kitchen, and another one is in there' vs. 'Our grandmother is in the kitchen, and another one is in there.' Second, they hardly pattern with words like 'also':??'Grandma is also a doctor' vs. 'The grandmother is also a doctor'. Gray himself takes these observations to favor predicativism on the grounds that bare names can similarly be derived from predicative names. However, as he clarifies, his account departs from standard predicativism, as it rejects the central thesis that bare names have predicate-type semantic values.

[33] Two caveats. First, descriptors and address terms do not always go hand in hand. Not every descriptor serves as an address term (e.g. 'Representative', 'University', 'Mount'), and vice versa (e.g. 'Your Highness', 'Dude', 'Folks'). Second, while these data challenge the view that descriptors belong to the standard predicate type, they do not directly support the proposals in § 4, in which descriptors themselves are not referential. Rather, my purpose here is to make a negative point. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on these issues.

conditions that must be met for an expression to be appropriately used in a context. When a presupposition trigger is used in a context where its presupposition is unsatisfied, the outcome is infelicity—either a truth-value gap or communicative failure—unless the presupposition is accommodated (cf. Lewis 1979; Beaver & Zeevat, 2007). For instance, if someone says, "Mary stopped smoking," even though Mary never smoked, then the utterance results in a presupposition failure, since the verb 'to stop' presupposes that an agent used to do the action in question. A standard way to implement this idea is to treat presupposition triggers as denoting partial functions, whose values are defined only for some—but not all—possible inputs. The domain of a partial function is restricted to the cases where the presupposition is fulfilled.[34] To illustrate, the semantics for 'stopped smoking' can be represented as follows:

37. $[\![\text{stopped smoking}]\!]^w = \lambda x_e.$ x doesn't smoke now in w, if x used to smoke in w; otherwise undefined.

Adopting this approach, we can formalize descriptors as partial identity functions of type <*e*,*e*>, which take an individual as input and return the same individual as output only if this individual satisfies their presuppositions. Complex names result from applying such descriptors to simple names. For example, 'Professor Russell' is analyzed as follows:

38. $[\![\text{Professor}]\!]^w = \lambda x_e.$ x, if x is a professor in w; otherwise undefined.

$[\![\text{Russell}]\!]^w = r$ (where r is a specific individual, e.g. Bertrand Russell).

$[\![\text{Professor Russell}]\!]^w = r$, if r is a professor in w; otherwise undefined.

This analysis predicts that a complex name fails to semantically refer if its presupposition is unsatisfied. In this case, complex names become *misnomers*—in a similar way to which referential definite descriptions misdescribe their intended referents.[35] Consider, for example, the debate over whether a huge inland body of water, called the Caspian Sea, is a sea or a lake.[36] If it turns out to be a lake, then 'the Caspian Sea' would be a misnomer, as its intended referent fails to satisfy the descriptor 'Sea'. When a complex name turns out to be a misnomer, language users may either retain it as a simple name or replace it with a more appropriate alternative, such as 'Lake Caspian'. Similar cases include 'the Millstone River' (vs. 'the Millstone Creek') and 'Mackinaw City' (vs. 'Mackinaw Town').[37]

[34] This is traced back to Frege (1892) and Strawson (1950). See also Heim and Kratzer (1998: 75).

[35] Suppose we initially believe someone to be Mary's brother and refer to him as such, only to later discover that he is actually her cousin. Even after learning this, we might somehow decide to call him 'Mary's brother' instead of 'Mary's cousin'. I suspect a similar—if not the same—mechanism is at work here. See also Cumming (2007: 23, fn.25). Thanks to Sam Cumming and Una Stojnić for helpful discussion.

[36] See Zimnitskaya and von Geldern (2011) for discussion. I owe this example to Una Stojnić and Sare Ghorbani Khaledi.

[37] See Soames (2002: 119; 2005) and McKinsey (2005).

On the second, information-packaging approach, presuppositions are understood as contents that are felt to be as backgrounded, uncontroversial, or non-asserted—in other words, not-at-issue. Two dimensions of meaning—at-issue and not-at-issue contents—are introduced to reflect the critical point that presupposition failure does not always give rise to a breakdown in semantic composition or communication (cf. Stalnaker, 1973; Yablo, 2006). A contested matter within this approach is how to distinguish presuppositions from other types of not-at-issue contents, e.g. conventional implicatures. Some theorists (e.g. Simons et al., 2010; Mandelkern, 2016) argue that there is no fundamental difference, while others (e.g. Potts, 2005, 2015; Sudo, 2012; Tonhauser et al., 2013) consider subtle empirical differences, some of which were discussed in § 2.

We need not resolve this issue here. As we have seen, the information encoded in complex names is not adequately captured by conventional or conversational implicatures. What matters at this stage is that their presuppositions contribute to their not-at-issue meaning, along the lines of Karttunen and Peters (1979). In this framework, natural language expressions consist of two dimensions of meaning: at-issue meaning and presupposition.[38] An expression ϕ is represented as a pair of values $<\phi^a, \phi^p>$, where ϕ^a is ϕ's at-issue meaning, and ϕ^p is its presupposition. Suppose, for simplicity, that simple names carry no presuppositions. Then, for instance, 'Russell' is analyzed as a pair of an individual constant and an empty presupposition set; and 'Professor Russell' has the same at-issue content as 'Russell', assuming their coreference. Since descriptors will operate in the presupposition dimension, the only difference lies in their not-at-issue or backgrounded content.[39]

39. $[\![\text{Russell}]\!]^w = <r, \emptyset>$

$[\![\text{Professor}]\!]^w = \lambda<x_e, P>.\ <x, P \wedge (x \text{ is a professor in } w)>$

$[\![\text{Professor Russell}]\!]^w = <r, r \text{ is a professor in } w>$

Unlike (38), (39) allows a complex name to semantically refer even when its presupposition is unsatisfied. On this analysis, the presupposition failure of a complex name does not affect its contribution to the at-issue content of the sentence in which it occurs (e.g. its truth conditions or assertoric content) though it may still lead to communicative difficulties by providing inaccurate background information about the referent's status or category. For instance, if someone refers to an instructor who is not a professor as a professor, saying "Professor Carruthers is generous," then the utterance expresses the same at-issue proposition as "Carruthers is generous," while incorrectly

[38] Karttunen and Peters further claim that presuppositions are a kind of conventional implicature, which is sometimes used to develop a theory of conventional implicature (e.g. Potts, 2005). However, this framework is neutral on whether the not-at-issue dimension encodes conventional implicature or presupposition. Building on it, for example, van Rooij (2005), Dekker (2008), and Sudo (2012) develop multi-dimensional models of presuppositions.

[39] McCready (2019: 86ff) offers a similar yet more detailed multi-dimensional semantics for honorific titles. Since her focus is on their honorific meanings, it rests upon the Pottsian framework, where not-at-issue meanings are conventional implicatures. We can give a parallel analysis in a multi-dimensional presupposition model (see fn.38).

portraying the referent as a professor. This misinformation, if unchallenged, may be tacitly accepted as uncontroversial among discourse participants, lurking in the background assumptions of subsequent discourse. As a result, misnomers retain semantic reference but encode misrepresentation in their not-at-issue dimension.

So the main difference between (38) and (39) consists in their treatment of presupposition failure. Whereas (38) translates presupposition failure into reference failure, (39) does not. This feature of (39) becomes particularly significant in differentiating complex names from definite descriptions in general and close appositives in particular. Given the Quinean analysis (§ 3), the close appositive 'the professor Carruthers' requires there to be a unique satisfier of 'the professor who is identical to Carruthers'. If no such individual exists, the description fails to denote, and thus a predication in which it occurs in an argument position won't have a definite truth-value or well-defined at-issue content. For instance, if the speaker instead says, "The professor who is identical to Carruthers is generous" (or "The professor who bears the name 'Carruthers' is generous"), the utterance fails to have the same at-issue content as "Carruthers is generous." In contrast, under (39), the complex name 'Professor Carruthers' still refers to the same individual as the embedded simple name in the same context. This may provide a reason to favor (39) over (38) as it has a more intuitive appeal.

Adjudicating between (38) and (39) goes beyond the scope of this paper. I believe both merit further discussion. However, even if one analysis is ultimately preferable, neither alone explains why complex names are syntactically constrained in ways that definite descriptions are not. As noted earlier, their word order and formation are strictly regulated, so there must be some principled way of ruling out, e.g. the replacement of 'Professor' (or 'River') with 'Faculty Member' (or 'Waterway') in a complex name and the introduction of 'Human' (or 'Tall Structure') as a descriptor. One possible explanation appeals to a type-shifting operator defined on predicates like 'Professor' but not on those like 'Faculty Member' or 'Human' (McCready 2019: 86ff.). This operator converts a predicate of type $<e,t>$ into a descriptor of type $<e,e>$, provided that the predicate falls within its domain. This type-shifter generates a restricted class of descriptors that can be combined with simple names to form complex names.

A more systematic treatment comes from a hierarchical syntactic framework, wherein the form of a complex name is governed by a formal template. As a concrete example, Cumming (2007) proposes a model in which the grammar of names follows a hierarchical structure that varies across lexical classes. For instance, personal names in English consist of (at least) first and last names:

person-nominal ::= *first-noun*$_1$ … *first-noun*$_n$ *sur-noun*

person-name ::= (*title*) *person-nominal* (*coda*) | (*title*) *sur-noun* | *first-noun*

Names of different categories, such as river names, receive a different standard schema:

river-nominal::= *proper-nominal* River| River *proper-nominal*

river-name::= the *river-nominal* | the *proper-nominal*

To reflect the idea that some names are "reduced forms" of others, Cumming introduces a reduction relation '$\triangleright$' defined over names. For example, the full personal name with a title 'Professor Bertrand Arthur William Russell' is reducible to 'Professor Bertrand Russell', 'Professor Russell', 'Bertrand Russell', 'Russell', or 'Bertrand'. Such reductions are achieved by operations like the following:

$[_{\text{NP}}\ (\textit{title})\ [_{\text{Nom}}\ \textit{first-noun}_1\ \ldots\ \textit{first-noun}_n\ \textit{sur-noun}]\ (\textit{coda})] \triangleright [_{\text{NP}}\ (\textit{title})\ [_{\text{Nom}}\ \textit{sur-noun}]]$

$[_{\text{NP}}(\textit{title})[_{\text{Nom}}\ \textit{first-noun}_1 \ldots \textit{first-noun}_n\ \textit{sur-noun}](\textit{coda})] \triangleright [_{\text{NP}}[_{\text{Nom}}\ \textit{first-noun}_i]]$

In many cases, reduced forms will be obtained by removing the descriptor(s). For instance, river names exhibit descriptor removal:

$[_{\text{NP}}$ the $[_{\text{Nom}}\ \textit{proper-nominal}$ River$]] \triangleright [_{\text{NP}}$ the $[_{\text{Nom}}\ \textit{proper-nominal}]]$

$[_{\text{NP}}$ the $[_{\text{Nom}}$ River $\textit{proper-nominal}]] \triangleright [_{\text{NP}}$ the $[_{\text{Nom}}\ \textit{proper-nominal}]]$

This framework allows us to distinguish between different occurrences of names, such as 'the River Nile', one *qua* river name and another *qua* book name. In the former case, the phrase encodes the information that the referent is a river, whereas in the latter, it occurs as a "flat" string of symbols devoid of a descriptor, precluding its reduction to 'the Nile'. Our interest has been in the former category, names with semantically active descriptors embedded in hierarchical structures, typically in their full forms. Accordingly, whether a name is classified as simple or complex depends in part on its lexico-syntactic category (e.g. river name vs. book name).

Furthermore, the framework helps block synonym substitution and overgeneration by introducing a distinct subcategory of *title nouns*, which occur in title positions, such as 'Professor', 'Sir', and 'Mrs.', each of which carries its own presupposition. For instance, the complex name 'Mrs. Mary Smith' conveys that its bearer is a married woman, because the embedded title 'Mrs.' presupposes marital status and female gender. The precise inventory of title nouns and the ways in which they evolve should be an empirical question, partly addressable through sociolinguistic investigations. One hypothesis (McCready, 2019: 80) suggests that only phrases involving social roles in a well-defined hierarchy serve as titles. We can allow for variation in the set of title nouns both synchronically and diachronically, depending on linguistic conventions within a given community. This accommodates, for instance, certain legal terms with negative valence in Japanese (e.g. *yoogisha* 'suspect' and *jukeisha* 'convict') are used as titles, whereas their English counterparts are not (ibid.: 81).

5 Conclusion

This paper set out to explore complex names such as 'Professor Russell', 'Stanford University', 'Mount Everest', and 'Iguazu Falls', highlighting their distinctive semantic properties and proposing a framework for their analysis. I have argued that

complex names carry presuppositional meanings rather than conversational or conventional implicatures. I have also demonstrated that treating complex names as definite descriptions inherits many of the challenges faced by descriptivist accounts about simple names—particularly involving rigidity, genericity, covariance, and 'one'-anaphora. Furthermore, complex names are neither compositional nor productive in the same way as definite descriptions, since their word order and internal structure are strictly regulated, much like idioms or collocations. Finally, I have outlined how their presuppositional meanings are analyzed within a hierarchical syntax, where complex names are formed by applying presuppositional descriptors to simple names in a template-governed manner. I acknowledge that further work is required to fully articulate the category of complex names, and that some empirical data may remain open to interpretation. Nevertheless, I have sought to draw attention to a phenomenon that has received oddly little scrutiny in both linguistic and philosophical literature. I hope this discussion helps stimulate further investigation into a broader spectrum of names, including those that have long remained on the margins of theoretical discussion.

Acknowledgements Special thanks go to Sam Cumming, James Gu, and Jungsuk Lee for their countless insightful comments, conversations, and suggestions, all of which have significantly improved this essay. I am also grateful to David Kaplan, Torsten Odland, and Carlotta Pavese for their careful reading and invaluable feedback. Further thanks go to Josh Armstrong, Jaewon Choe, Elizabeth Coppock, Gabe Greenberg, Daehwi Jeong, Sare Ghorbani Khaledi, Minseok Kim, Donghoon Lee, Eunhong Lee, Sanggu Lee, Alonso Molina, Seongsoo Park, Yael Sharvit, Wooseung Shin, Una Stojnić, Jenny Wu, Seungchul Yang, and Inchul Yum for their very helpful questions, comments, and encouragement. I also thank the audiences at the KSAP 2021 Graduate Workshop, the NASSLLI 2022 Student Session, the UCLA 2023 Proposition Talk Series, and the KPAS 2024–25 Workshop for helpful discussion. Many anonymous reviewers provided copious, incisive, and constructive comments. I am deeply grateful to all of them, and especially to those for *Synthese*. Finally, I would like to acknowledge Sungho Choi's 2016 Korean paper, "Is 'Admiral Soonshin Yi' a Name or a Description?", which initially sparked my interest in these intriguing linguistic data.

Declarations

Competing interests There are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

References

Abrusán, M. (2023). Presuppositions. In D. Altshuler (Ed.), *Linguistics Meets philosophy* (pp. 470–501). Cambridge University Press.

Bach, K. (2002). Giorgione was so-called because of his name. *Philosophical Perspectives*, *16*(1), 73–103.

Beaver, D., & Zeevat, H. (2007). Accommodation. In G. Ramchand, & C. Reiss (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of linguistic interfaces* (pp. 503–538). Oxford University Press.
Beaver, D., Geurts, B., & Denlinger, K. (2024). Presupposition. In Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/presupposition/
Brill, S. (2015). What the Legal Battle over Trump University Reveals about Its Founder. *Time*, Nov 5. https://time.com/4101290/
Burge, T. (1973). Reference and proper names. *The Journal of Philosophy*, *70*(14), 425–439.
Chierchia, G., & McConnell-Ginet, S. (1990). *Meaning and grammar*. MIT Press.
Choi, S. (2016). Is 'Admiral Soonsin Yi' a name or a description? *Chul-hak-sa-sang: Journal of Philosophical Ideas*, *62*, 143–171.
Cumming, S. (2007). *Proper Nouns*. PhD Thesis. Rutgers University.
Cumming, S. (2023). Names. In Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (Eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/names/
Dekker, P. (2008). A multi-dimensional treatment of quantification in extraordinary english. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, *31*(2), 101–127.
Delgado, L. (2019). Between singularity and generality. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, *42*(4), 381–417.
Delgado, L. (2022). Names vs nouns. *Philosophical Studies*, *179*(12), 3233–3258.
Elbourne, P. (2005). *Situations and individuals*. MIT Press.
Fara, D. G. (2015). Names are predicates. *Philosophical Review*, *124*(1), 59–117.
Frege, G. (1892). Über Sinn und Bedeutung. Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik, 100, 25–50. (M. Black, Trans., 1948). Sense and Reference. *Philosophical Review*, *57*(3), 209–230.
Gray, A. (2018). Lexical-rule predicativism about names. *Synthese*, *195*(12), 5549–5569.
Grice, P. (1975). Logic and conversation. *Studies in the way of words* (pp. 22–40). Harvard University Press.
Harrison, E. (2025). X Æ A-Xii: How to Pronounce the Name of Elon Musk and Grimes' Son. *The Independent*, Feb 12. https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/elon-musk-child-name-grimes-pronounce-x-ae-a-xii-b2696911.html
Hawthorne, J., & Manley, D. (2012). *The reference book*. Oxford University Press.
Heim, I., & Kratzer, A. (1998). *Semantics in generative grammar*. Wiley-Blackwell.
Jackendoff, R. (1984). On the phrase the phrase 'the phrase'. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*, *2*, 25–37.
Jeshion, R. (2015). Referentialism and predicativism about proper names. *Erkenntnis*, *80*, 363–404.
Jeshion, R. (2017). 'The' problem for the-Predicativism. *Philosophical Review*, *126*, 219–240.
Kaplan, D. (1989). Demonstratives/Afterthoughts. In J. Almog, J. Perry, & H. Wettstein (Eds.), *Themes from kaplan* (pp. 481–563). Oxford University Press.
Karttunen, L. (1973). Presuppositions of compound sentences. *Linguistic Inquiry*, *4*, 169–193.
Karttunen, L., & Peters, S. (1979). Conventional implicature. In C. Oh, & D. Dinneen (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics, 11: Presupposition* (pp. 1–56). Academic.
King, J. (2006). Singular terms, reference, and methodology in semantics. *Philosophical Issues*, *16*, 141–161.
Kripke, S. (1980). *Naming and necessity*. Harvard University Press.
Kripke, S. (2011 [1979]). A puzzle about belief. *Philosophical troubles* (pp. 125–161). Oxford University Press.
Leckie, G. (2013). The double life of names. *Philosophical Studies*, *165*, 1139–1160.
Lee, J. (2020a). Against predicativism about names. *Philosophical Studies*, *177*, 243–261.
Lee, J. (2020b). On the asymmetry between names and count nouns. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, *43*, 277–301.
Leiws, D. (1979). Scorekeeping in a language game. *Journal of philosophical logic*, *8*, 339–359.
Mandelkern, M. (2016). Dissatisfaction theory. *Semantics and Linguistic Theory*, *26*, 391–416.
Martí, G. (2003). The question of rigidity in new theories of reference. *Noûs*, *37*, 161–179.
Matushansky, O. (2008). On the linguistic complexity of proper names. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, *31*, 573–627.
McCready, E. (2010). Varieties of conventional implicature. *Semantics and Pragmatics*, *3*, 1–57.
McCready, E. (2019). *The semantics and pragmatics of honorification*. Oxford University Press.
McKinsey, M. (2005). Critical notice of Scott Soames, *Beyond rigidity*. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *35*, 149–168.
Potts, C. (2005). *The logic of conventional implicatures*. Oxford University Press.

Potts, C. (2015). Presupposition and implicature. In S. Lappin, & C. Fox (Eds.), *The handbook of contemporary semantic theory* (2nd ed., pp. 168–202). Wiley-Blackwell.
Potts, C., & Kawahara, S. (2004). Japanese honorifics as emotive definite descriptions. *Proceedings of Semantics and Linguistic Theory*, *14*, 253–270.
Quine, W. V. (1960). *Word and object*. MIT Press.
Rabern, B. (2015). Descriptions which have grown capital letters. *Mind and Language*, *30*, 292–319.
Rett, J. (2020). Manner implicatures and how to spot them. *International Review of Pragmatics*, *12*, 44–79.
Rieppel, M. (2021). Quinean predicativism. *Philosophical Studies*, *178*, 23–44.
Sag, I. A., Baldwin, T., Bond, F., Copestake, A., & Flickinger, D. (2002). Multiword expressions: A pain in the neck for NLP. *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Intelligent Text Processing and Computational Linguistics*, *2276*, 1–15.
Schoubye, A. (2017). Type-ambiguous names. *Mind*, *126*, 715–767.
Shanon, B. (1976). On the two kinds of presupposition in natural Language. *Foundations of Language*, *14*, 247–249.
Simons, M., Tonhauser, J., Beaver, D., & Roberts, C. (2010). What projects and why. *Proceedings of Semantics and Linguistic Theory*, *20*, 309–327.
Sloat, C. (1969). Proper nouns in English. *Language*, *45*, 26–30.
Soames, S. (2002). *Beyond rigidity*. Oxford University Press.
Soames, S. (2005). Reply to McKinsey. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *35*, 169–178.
Stalnaker, R. (1973). Presuppositions. *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, *2*, 447–457.
Strawson, P. F. (1950). On referring. *Mind*, *59*, 320–344.
Sudo, Y. (2012). *On the Semantics of Phi Features on Pronouns*. PhD Thesis. MIT.
Tonhauser, J., Beaver, D., Roberts, C., & Simons, M. (2013). Toward a taxonomy of projective content. *Language*, *89*, 66–109.
van Kuppevelt, J. (1996). Inferring from topics: Implicatures as Topic-dependent inferences. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, *19*, 393–443.
van Rooij, R. (2005). A modal analysis of presupposition and modal subordination. *Journal of Semantics*, *22*, 281–306.
von Fintel, K. (1999). NPI licensing, Strawson entailment, and context dependency. *Journal of Semantics*, *16*(2), 97–148.
von Fintel, K. (2004). Would you believe it? The King of France is back!. In A. Bezuidenhout, & M. Reimer (Eds.), *Descriptions and beyond* (pp. 315–341). Oxford University Press.
Yablo, S. (2006). Non-catastrophic presupposition failure. In J. Thomson, & A. Byrne (Eds.), *Content and modality: Themes from the philosophy of Robert C. Stalnaker* (pp. 164–190). Oxford University Press.
Zimnitskaya, H., & von Geldern, J. (2011). Is the Caspian Sea a sea; and why does it matter?. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, *2*, 1–14.