

Recovering What Is Said With Empty Names¹

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Abstract. Millians hold that the meaning of a proper name is just its referent. Empty names have no referent. Accordingly, assuming semantic compositionality, utterances containing empty names have no literal, truth-evaluable meaning. Nothing truth-evaluable is said, in Grice's sense, by such utterances. But the intuitions of ordinary speakers are that utterances containing empty names are meaningful. In recent years, some Millians have attempted to explain such ordinary intuitions in terms of what is pragmatically imparted by sentences containing empty names. We argue that this strategy fails. We show that when nothing truth-

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evaluable is said by an utterance, intuitions to this effect can be recovered by speakers. But no such intuitions appear to be recoverable for sentences containing empty names. Furthermore, we argue that alternative Millian strategies for dealing with empty names are even worse off. Unlike Millianism, a good semantic theory should assign meaning to both full and empty names.

1. Introduction

As our data will show, negative existential sentences containing so-called *empty* names evoke the same strong semantic intuitions in ordinary speakers and philosophers alike.

- (1)
- (a) Santa Claus does not exist.
 - (b) Superman does not exist.
 - (c) Clark Kent does not exist.

Uttering the sentences in (1) seems to *say something truth-evaluable*, to say something *true*, and to say something *different* for each sentence. A semantic theory ought to explain these semantic intuitions.

The intuitions elicited by (1) are in apparent conflict with the Millian view of proper names. According to Millianism, the meaning (or “semantic value”) of a proper name is just its referent. But empty names, such as ‘Santa Claus’ and ‘Superman’, appear to lack a referent. If they do, then Millianism entails that they have no meaning. Therefore, assuming semantic compositionality, utterances of sentences with empty names *say nothing truth-evaluable*, have *no truth-value*, and what they say is the *same*. These are unhappy consequences for Millianism.

There have been a number of recent attempts to accommodate our semantic intuitions about empty names within a Millian framework (Adams & Dietrich, 2004; Braun, 2005; Predelli

2002; Reimer 2001a, b; Ryckman 1988; Salmon, 1998; Taylor, 2000, 2001; Wyatt 2007). Most of these attempts are based on two theses. First, empty names have no referent. Second, sentences containing empty names express gappy propositions (see below). In addition, some Millians maintain two more theses. The third thesis is that gappy propositions have no truth values. The fourth thesis is that sentences containing empty names pragmatically impart descriptive propositions that ordinary speakers mistake for the content of these sentences. We call the conjunction of all four theses *pragmatic Millianism*. According to pragmatic Millianism, speakers mistakenly judge the sentences in (1) to be true and to have different contents because they confuse the gappy propositions they express with the descriptive propositions they pragmatically impart (Adams and Dietrich 2004, Taylor 2000, Wyatt 2007).²

Among Millian theories of proper names, we think pragmatic Millianism is the most plausible. In this paper, we carry out a novel strategy for testing it.

We will argue as follows:

(A) Pragmatic Millianism entails that *nothing truth-evaluable is said*, in the Gricean sense, by utterances containing empty names.

(B) If nothing truth-evaluable is said by an utterance, then ordinary speakers should be able to *recover* that nothing is said.

(C) In the case of utterances containing empty names, ordinary speakers do *not* recover that nothing truth-evaluable is said.

Therefore, pragmatic Millianism is wrong.

² Pragmatic Millianism has also been developed as a more general semantic theory, with applications beyond the case of empty names (Soames, 2002; Thau, 2002).

After presenting this argument, we will briefly tackle other (non-pragmatic) Millian accounts of empty names and find them even less satisfactory. We will conclude that Millians have not given a satisfactory account of empty names. Finally, we will outline a more promising account due to Larson and Segal (1995).

2. Pragmatic Millianism about Empty Names

According to the standard Millian view, a simple existential sentence like (2)(a) expresses a singular proposition, which can be thought of as an ordered pair containing the referent of the name and the property of existence, as depicted in (2)(b).

(2)

(a) David Bowie exists

(b) $\langle \text{David Bowie}, \text{existence} \rangle$

By analogy, an existential sentence containing an empty name, such as (3)(a), expresses a gappy proposition, which can be thought of as an ordered pair with a gap where the referent of the empty name would have gone, as depicted in (3)(b).

(3)

(a) Santa Claus exists

(b) $\langle ______, \text{existence} \rangle$

Since this gappy proposition is not a full proposition, it can be neither true nor false. (Some theorists disagree; their view is discussed in Section 7.)

Pragmatic Millians account for the ordinary intuition that (3)(a) is false by suggesting that this sentence, though it expresses no determinate propositional content, can be used to *pragmatically impart* a false descriptive proposition involving descriptive material associated with the name ‘Santa Claus’ – e.g., the proposition that there is a jolly fat man who delivers

presents to children all over the world at Christmas. This proposition is false, and it's the source of the intuition that (3)(a) says something false.

Fred Adams and his co-authors think that this proposition is arrived at through garden variety Gricean mechanisms of conversational implicature, while Kenneth Taylor and Nicole Wyatt think that there is a special stage of pragmatic processing that operates on gappy propositions prior to full-blown conversational implicatures (Adams & Dietrich, 2004; Adams & Stecker, 1994; Adams et al., 1992; Taylor, 2000; 2001; Wyatt, 2007).³ However conceived, this same pragmatic process is invoked to explain truth and content intuitions regarding any sentence containing empty names, not just positive and negative existentials.

As Adams and Dietrich put it, one of the main strengths of pragmatic Millianism is its semantic “simplicity and economy” (Adams & Dietrich, 2004, 141). Rather than resorting to “special pleading” on behalf of empty names, pragmatic Millianism accepts the emptiness of empty names along with all the semantic consequences that such a view entails (Taylor, 2000, 168). On pragmatic Millianism, there is no need to resort to the compromising claims that empty names might be disguised descriptions or refer to Meinongian non-existent objects. Nor is there reason to strain our notion of proposition by attributing truth values to gappy propositions. Nevertheless, we will argue against pragmatic Millianism.

3. The Translucency of What Is Said

To motivate our approach, let's begin with an objection to pragmatic Millianism raised by Marga Reimer (2001a). As we said, pragmatic Millianism explains our semantic intuitions about

³ Thomas Ryckman (1988) defends a theory similar in spirit to pragmatic Millianism. Although our argument refutes Ryckman's theory too, we will leave this implicit.

sentences containing empty names by distinguishing between what is said and what is pragmatically imparted by uttering such sentences. Although what is said is a gappy proposition, which is not truth-evaluable, one or more truth-valuable descriptive propositions are pragmatically imparted. Such pragmatically imparted propositions are the alleged source of our semantic intuitions about the original sentences. Reimer objects as follows:

The problem with this account is that it does not withstand informed reflection. For even *after* we are apprised of the distinction between what is said and what is communicated [i.e., pragmatically imparted], we *still* want to say that, in sincerely uttering sentences containing empty names, we *say* and do not just *communicate*, propositions that are truth-evaluable (Reimer, 2001a, 502, emphasis original).

This objection goes in the right direction but is inconclusive as it stands.

Reimer appears to assume that speakers, at least upon informed reflection, can directly intuit what is said versus what is pragmatically imparted (communicated). This assumption needs justification. As Reimer knows, the notion of what is said was introduced by Paul Grice precisely because there is often a difference between what is said by uttering a sentence and the semantic content that listeners attribute to the sentence. As we shall see in the next section, there are different views about the nature of what is said and whether it is processed consciously or unconsciously. It cannot be simply assumed that speakers, even upon informed reflection, have direct access to what is said as such (cf. Green 2007, 431). Nevertheless, Reimer's remark points in the direction of a real problem for pragmatic Millianism. In fact, the problem it points to faces other semantic theories, including hers.

What relationship is there between what is said by uttering a sentence and the semantic intuitions of speakers? One possibility, apparently endorsed by Reimer, is that speakers, perhaps

upon informed reflection, directly intuit that something is said as opposed to pragmatically imparted. This view may be called *transparency* of what is said. As we pointed out, transparency is too strong. Another possibility is that ordinary speakers' semantic intuitions need not bear in any way on what is said. This view may be called *opacity* of what is said. If opacity holds, a hypothesis about what is said by uttering a sentence cannot be disconfirmed by appealing to ordinary semantic intuitions. If opacity holds for sentences containing empty names, pragmatic Millianism is insulated from Reimer's objection. For if speakers' semantic intuitions need not bear on what is said by uttering sentences containing empty names, then none of their intuitions could possibly disconfirm the view – held by pragmatic Millians as well as many other Millians – that nothing truth-evaluable is said by uttering such sentences.

But opacity is a non-starter. Opacity obliterates the connection between what is said and the semantic competence of ordinary speakers. This is unacceptable. It may well be plausible that speakers cannot easily recover what is said as such, which goes against transparency. But their semantic intuitions – including intuitions about whether something is said by uttering a sentence – must be accommodated by a theory of what is said. Otherwise the notion of what is said floats free from empirical evidence and becomes empirically sterile.

Grice introduced the notion of what is said to capture, among other things, the information conveyed by sentences on the basis of what he called their “conventional” meaning. Presumably, the conventional meaning of sentences is tacitly known to (or cognized by) competent speakers. At any rate, any semantic theory of natural language must postulate *some* link between what is said and speakers' semantic competence, as exhibited by their semantic intuitions. The link may be indirect, but it must exist. The alternative is to change the subject

and leave the domain of semantic theory. The reasonable solution is to take an intermediate position between transparency and opacity. We will call it *translucency* of what is said.⁴

A standard link between speakers' intuitions and what is said can be drawn via implicature cancellation. Grice pointed out that given an appropriate context, implicatures can be canceled. Normally, uttering "she got drunk and crashed her car" implicates that she first got drunk, and then crashed her car. But an appropriate change of context, as in "she got drunk and crashed her car, but not in that order," cancels the implicature. In a recent article, Mitchell Green exploits the cancelability of implicatures to argue against the implicature-based version of pragmatic Millianism.

Green reasons as follows. Assume the implicature-based version of pragmatic Millianism, according to which sentences containing empty names conversationally implicate descriptive sentences whose meaning is confused by speakers with the meaning of the original sentences. Such implicatures are cancelable. When they are canceled, speakers should "hear that the original sentence fails to express a proposition" (Green, 2007, 434). But contrary to this prediction, speakers continue to hear the original sentence as truth-evaluable. Therefore, Green concludes, the implicature-based version of pragmatic Millianism is mistaken.

We think Green's strategy is largely correct and we are sympathetic with much of what he says. In fact, we propose to push Green's strategy farther than he takes it. One limit of Green's execution is that Green asserts his crucial premise—that speakers should hear that the original sentence fails to express a proposition—without argument. Green's premise goes beyond what happens in standard cases of implicature cancellation. In standard cases, something

⁴ Thanks to Mitchell Green for suggesting the term 'translucency'.

truth-evaluable is said by an utterance, and speakers recover information about what is said after implicatures are canceled. But in the present case, according to pragmatic Millianism, nothing truth-evaluable is said by the utterance. Why believe that speakers can recover that nothing truth-evaluable is said by the utterance? Another limit of Green's execution is that he doesn't consider all the pertinent implicatures of sentences containing empty names. In fact, Adams and Fuller (2007, 454ff.) reply that Green's argument fails because he hasn't considered the right implicatures. A third limit of Green's execution is that his argument leaves non-implicature-based versions of pragmatic Millianism untouched.

The following paper, albeit originally written independently of Green's, may be seen as defending Green's crucial premise, generalizing his argument, and rebutting Adams and Fuller (2007) on his behalf. In the next section, we will distinguish between two notions of what is said, which allows us to be more precise about a number of issues. One such issue is the difference between implicature-based pragmatic Millianism and other forms of pragmatic Millianism. Generalizing Green's argument, we will dispute all versions of pragmatic Millianism. We will argue that under appropriate conditions, speakers can recover important aspects of what is said – most relevantly, whether something truth-evaluable is said by uttering a sentence.

We endorse the translucency of what is said. Rather than assuming that speakers can directly intuit what is said as such, we provide positive evidence that competent speakers can recover intuitions that something or other is said, or that nothing truth-evaluable is said, under appropriate conditions.

Our main tools will be the following three tests:

(i) The Embedding Test: Can a syntactic structure be successfully embedded in contexts such as, “The speaker literally said that ___”? If not, this is evidence that nothing truth-evaluable is said by an utterance. (If yes, we will not consider this enough to show that something truth-evaluable is said by an utterance; hence, we will not use the embedding test to evaluate what is said by utterances containing empty names.)

(ii) Generalized Cancellation Test: Can an alleged implicature (or pragmatic enrichment, or other process of meaning completion) be cancelled without generating a feeling of contradiction? Suppose that, as Millians maintain, utterances containing empty names say nothing truth-evaluable. And suppose that, as pragmatic Millians maintain, we feel that such utterances say something truth-evaluable because of what they pragmatically impart. Then, the result of cancelling such pragmatic inferences should (a) leave us searching for alternative pragmatic inferences and (b) in the absence of suitable alternatives, leave us feeling that nothing truth-evaluable was said and (c) not leave us with a sense that the utterance is truth-evaluable. Notice that our generalized cancellation test is broader than Grice’s cancellation test (used by Green), because as we will argue, it applies not only to implicatures but to other forms of pragmatic inference and meaning completion.

(iii) The Contradiction Test: Can an utterance be contradicted? When nothing truth-evaluable is said by an utterance, we cannot contradict or deny or reject what results from uttering it (after canceling any potential implicatures or enrichments).

We will argue that by a suitable use of some of these tests (depending on the case), speakers can obtain intuitions from which it may be inferred whether something truth-evaluable is said by an utterance. After that, we will test pragmatic Millianism. The upshot will be negative: intuitions that nothing truth-evaluable is said are not recoverable for sentences

containing empty names. This undermines pragmatic Millianism, and Millianism more generally: there is no evidence that speakers' intuitions are ever in line with what – according to Millianism – is said by uttering sentences containing empty names.⁵

4. Recovering What is Said

According to Grice, the notion of what is said plays two roles. On one hand, what is said is the input to an inferential process that the audience will use to determine conversational implicatures.⁶ On the other hand, what is said is the conventional meaning of the uttered sentence, plus relevant contextual information. As Grice recognized, pragmatic or contextual factors play a role in determining what is said. What is said by an utterance results not only from the conventional linguistic meaning of the sentence type, but also, at a minimum, from pragmatic processes of disambiguation and saturation (i.e., reference assignment to names and indexicals) that must be applied to yield a determinate proposition as the literal meaning of the utterance. This is the minimal notion of what is said, or *what is said_{min}*.

There are also non-minimalists who favor a more richly pragmatic account of what is said. Consider someone's utterance of (4).

(4) I've had breakfast.

⁵ Other objections to pragmatic Millianism are raised by Everett (2003), to which Adams and Dietrich (2004) and Wyatt (2007) reply. There is also a considerable literature on pragmatic Millianism in general, with no specific reference to the semantics of empty names (cf. Caplan, 2007). Since here we are concerned primarily with the semantics of empty names, we will set that literature aside.

⁶ More precisely, Grice (1989) says that *the saying* of what is said (as opposed to what is said tout court) carries the implicatures of an utterance. This is because what is said is consistent with the falsity of the implicata. For simplicity, we will omit this qualification and speak of inferences from what is said to what is implicated.

In most contexts, it is implicitly understood that the speaker means she's had breakfast *today*, not the more literal reading that she's had breakfast at least once in the past. Minimalists argue that what is said_{min} is this literal reading; anything further the speaker might mean is a pragmatic enrichment of the literal meaning. Non-minimalists dispute the usefulness of the notion of what is said_{min} on the grounds that under normal circumstances, neither the speaker nor the listener is consciously aware of the minimal content (Recanati, 1989, 2004). They argue that what the speaker and listener are aware of, and will use to generate Gricean implicatures, is the pragmatically enriched content. This is the pragmatic notion of what is said, or *what is said_{prag}*.

Whether or not non-minimalists are right about what is said_{prag}, what is said_{min} is still *recoverable*. One way to show this is through a generalized version of Grice's *cancellation test*. As an example, consider the sentences in (5). The clause after the comma in (5)(a) cancels the usual implicature that the order of the phrases linked by the word 'and' indicates the temporal order of the events.

(5)

(a) She got drunk and crashed her car, but not in that order.

(b) She got drunk and crashed her car, but she didn't get drunk.

(5)(a) is not contradictory, so the temporal order must not be part of the literal meaning of the utterance. By contrast, (5)(b) *is* contradictory, indicating that the truth of both clauses linked by 'and' *is* part of that literal meaning.

Now, if one applies the cancellation test to cases like (4), in which the consciously available reading of what is said might result from pragmatic enrichments that go beyond disambiguation and saturation, those pragmatic enrichments can be cancelled without contradiction, as in (6)(a), while parts of what is said_{min} cannot, as in (6)(b).

(6)

(a) I've had breakfast, but not today.

(b) I've had breakfast, but it wasn't breakfast.

The same phenomenon occurs in the joke: “Well, I had a beautiful evening... Unfortunately, tonight wasn't one of them.”⁷ These examples show that ordinary speakers can recognize and recover what is said_{min}, even if it was not consciously available to them at the time of utterance.⁸ This is not to say that what is said_{min} is necessarily *processed* at the time of an utterance. Many non-minimalists doubt that it is. The point is simply that whether or not listeners represent what is said_{min} by an utterance while they are engaged in the normal process of understanding it, they can recover what is said_{min} under appropriate circumstances.

In the case of utterances containing empty names, Pragmatic Millians differ over whether Grice's two roles for what is said are played by a single entity or by two separate entities.

Adams and his co-authors claim that when utterances contain empty names, both roles are played by what is said_{min} – the gappy proposition that results from linguistic meaning plus disambiguation plus (failed) saturation. By contrast, Taylor and Wyatt argue that, although what

⁷ Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this example, which s/he attributes to Groucho Marx. As the referee points out, listeners cannot get the joke unless they recover what is said_{min} by uttering the first clause. The same referee offered another piece of evidence that competent listeners can recover what is said_{min} by an utterance. Most listeners quickly pick up a speaker's implied meaning behind utterances of vacuous truths (“À la guerre comme à la guerre”) and contradictions (Question: “Isn't that nice?” Answer: “It is and it isn't”). It's hard to see how listeners could grasp the intended message without also being able to recover what is said_{min}.

⁸ Bach (2001) also points this out, although he refers to availability and recoverability as two different kinds of “availability”.

is said_{min} does play the role of the literal meaning of the utterance, a special pragmatic process – other than implicature – generates a non-singular proposition (after saturation fails to assign a reference to an empty name). This pragmatically determined proposition plays the role of what is said_{prag} in the generation of implicatures. Here’s an example:

(7)

(a) Donald Trump is not Santa Claus.

(b) Donald Trump is not the jolly fat man who brings presents to children at Christmas.

(c) Children should not expect presents from Donald Trump.

Sentence (7)(a) might be used to conversationally implicate (7)(c). On Adams and his co-authors’ view, what is said_{min} is a gappy proposition that enters into the generation of implicatures. Implicatures generated include (7)(c) as well as the descriptive proposition in (7)(b), which somehow also plays the privileged role of providing the intuition that (7)(a) is true. On Taylor and Wyatt’s view, a special pragmatic process produces (7)(b), which plays the role of what is said_{prag} in generating implicatures like (7)(c).^{9,10}

⁹ Taylor might object to this way of putting his view, because to claim that the descriptive proposition counts for some purposes as what is said_{prag} sounds perilously close to claiming that it is *asserted* by the utterance, something that Wyatt accepts but Taylor explicitly rejects. But that is not the view we are ascribing to him. We are only ascribing to him the view that for the purposes of generating Gricean conversational implicatures, the non-singular proposition serves as the input, and in that sense plays one of Grice’s two roles for what is said.

¹⁰ An anonymous referee pointed out that pragmatic Millians face special difficulties when dealing with this sort of example. Sentence (7)(b) has two readings on a Russellian account of definite descriptions – a wide scope reading (‘there is an x such that x is a jolly fat man who brings presents to children at Christmas and Donald Trump $\neq x$ ’) and a narrow scope reading (‘it is not the case that there is an x such that x is a jolly fat man who brings presents to

So although pragmatic Millians offer two competing accounts of how pragmatic processes deliver the non-singular proposition, both entail the recoverability of a gappy proposition as what is said_{min}. Taylor's account further suggests that the pragmatically enriched non-singular proposition plays a special role as what is said_{prag} – it is immediately consciously available to the participants and can play the role of what is said in the generation of Gricean implicature.

5. Recovering that Nothing Is Said

Grice's typical examples of what is said are truth-evaluable contents. Truth-evaluable contents can be construed in different ways; according to most Millians, truth-evaluable contents are propositions.¹¹ But as we shall see, there are plenty of linguistic structures that express less than a truth-evaluable content – less than a proposition. Examples include sub-sentential structures,

children at Christmas and Donald Trump = x '). Pragmatic Millians explain the intuition that an utterance of (7)(a) is true by claiming that people mistake it to mean the same as (7)(b). Question: on which reading of (7)(b)? It is prima facie more plausible that, if listeners drew pragmatic inferences from the gappy content allegedly corresponding to the meaning of (7)(a) (i.e., something like <Donald Trump, \neq , _____>), they would generate a content corresponding to the wide scope reading of (7)(b). But that gives the wrong results, because (7)(b) is false under the wide scope reading. So the relevant reading must be the narrow scope reading, under which (7)(b) is true. Yet it's hard to see how that would be generated by listeners using the mechanisms postulated by pragmatic Millianism. It's also hard to see how the narrow reading of (7)(b) could help generate (7)(c) as a conversational implicature (as per Taylor and Wyatt's accounts). It is easier to see how that might happen under the wide scope reading of (7)(b), but then we're back with the problem that (7)(b) is false under the wide scope reading. In conclusion, it seems difficult for pragmatic Millians to have all they need in dealing with this sort of case.

¹¹ For the time being, we will go along and talk of truth-evaluable contents as propositions. This should not be construed as an endorsement of propositions.

semantically incomplete sentences, and sentence-like structures that contain non-words. In Gricean terms, *nothing truth-evaluable is said*, or at least nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min}, by utterances of these types. Pragmatic Millians maintain that sentences containing empty names are like that – nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} by uttering them. If nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} by an utterance, then intuitions to that effect ought to be recoverable by ordinary speakers. Why? Because such intuitions are easily recoverable in other cases where it is plausible that nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min}. If nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} by utterances containing empty names – as pragmatic Millians maintain – the same intuitions should be recoverable for such utterances too.

5.1 Sub-Sentential Communication

Adams and Dietrich provide our first class of examples. They point out that certain kinds of sub-sentential utterances can be used to implicate full propositions, even when what is said_{min} is something less than a proposition.

...upon hearing that President Bush was in favor of relaxing the standards for tolerable amounts of arsenic in the water supply, Gary might say:

(8) Oh, that Bush!

Now we maintain that quite clearly Gary pragmatically imparts that he disapproves of Bush's action, but Gary did not express a complete proposition having this implication. We maintain that such examples are easy to generate and perfectly Gricean (Adams and Dietrich, 2004, 138, our sentence numbering).

Note that implicatures based on this kind of sub-sentential utterance, although they fail one of Grice's criteria for communicating implicatures (because nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min}), still

pass the recoverability test. When asked what Gary literally said in the above example, the intuition is that literally, he said_{min} nothing truth-evaluable – there is nothing to fill in the blank in ‘Gary literally said that ____’. Furthermore, what is pragmatically imparted by such utterances can be cancelled without contradiction. In the above example, Gary could have cancelled the implicature that he disapproved of Bush’s action. For example, he could have said:

(9) Oh, that Bush! But I support what he did.

This case differs somewhat from standard cases of implicature cancellation – the cancellation of the implicature in this case causes the audience to search for alternative implicatures. There is no literal truth-evaluable content to fall back on – in fact, there is nothing there that can be contradicted. Thus, the cancellation test is a route by which the intuition that nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} can be recovered.

It may be objected that (8) belongs to the wrong syntactic type to be compared to sentences containing empty names. According to this objection, it may well be easy to recover that nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} by an utterance of (8) even though the utterance implicates a proposition; however, this shows nothing about sentences containing empty names, because (8) is not a sentence.

Actually, whether (8) is a sentence is debatable. Consider some other examples of so-called *sub-sentential communication* (from Stainton, 2005). As a woman appears at the door, Alice tells Brie,

(10) Sam’s mom.

It is plausible that by uttering (10), Alice asserts (and surely, she communicates) that the woman at the door is Sam’s mom. Lifting up a letter, Carol utters,

(11) From Spain.

It is plausible that by uttering (11), Carol asserts (and surely, she communicates) that the letter in her hand is from Spain.

There are two prominent ways of interpreting this kind of sub-sentential communication, neither of which relies on implicature. On one view, advocated by Robert Stainton (2005) and others, these are examples of genuine sub-sentential assertions. A sub-sentential structure, such as (10) and (11), may be used to assert (not just implicate) a fully truth-evaluable content. In our terminology, the asserted content is presumably what is said_{prag}; it is recovered by listeners via a process of pragmatic enrichment. On another view, advocated by Jason Stanley (2000) and others, (10) and (11) are ordinary sentential assertions. This is because utterances of (10) and (11) are elliptical. We have neither room nor need to enter the intricacies of this debate. Suffice it to say that regardless of which view is correct, it remains easy to recover the intuition that nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} by just uttering (8), (10), and (11)—without help from the context of utterance. This is because the same contexts in which implicatures are canceled also inhibit the processes postulated by Stainton and Stanley’s theories—respectively, pragmatic enrichment and the assignment of values to the relevant phonetically unrealized contextual parameters present at the level of logical form.

One way to see this is to try to fill in the blank in the indirect quotation, ‘X literally said that ___’. It cannot be done for (10) and (11). Another way is to consider the following permissible continuations of (10) and (11):

(12)

- (a) Sam’s mom ... is not the person at the door.
- (b) From Spain ... is not where this letter is from.

In these cases, a listener might interpret the first part of 12(a)-(b) in the same way as (10) and (11). But hearing the rest of the sentences will prompt the listener to revise her initial interpretation. In (12), the initial interpretation is canceled by embedding the original phrases into larger sentential contexts. It may also be canceled without doing so:

(13)

(a) Sam's mom ..., not to say that the person at the door is Sam's mom.

(b) From Spain ..., not to say that this letter is from Spain.

In (13), canceling the content communicated by (10) and (11) leads to a search for a new interpretation, which cannot rest at considering (10) and (11) alone.¹² There is nothing that can be contradicted after the initial interpretation is canceled. 'Sam's mom, but not Sam's mom' may sound like a contradiction, but only if we semantically complete both phrases in the same way. The reasonable conclusion is that nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} by uttering (10) and (11) alone.

If the ellipsis view of such cases is correct, these are examples in which it is easy to recover that nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} by uttering a sentence. But even if the sub-sentential view of these cases is correct, it is still a case in which speakers can easily recover that

¹² Elugardo and Stainton have argued that "it is hard to cancel the propositions meant" in the above examples:

[T]o hold up a pen and say 'Purchased in Germany', and then to continue by saying 'Not to say that this thing in my hand was purchased in Germany' would be odd in a way that canceling an implicatures is not (Elugardo and Stainton, 2005, 5).

Their point is in line with the plausible view that the proposition that this thing in my hand was purchased in Germany is asserted, rather than merely implicated, by uttering 'Purchased in Germany' while holding up a pen. If they are right, this strengthens our case. For it's further evidence that the cancellation test can be used to recover what is said_{min} from what is said_{prag}, which will help us handle Taylor's version of pragmatic Millianism.

nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} by an utterance even though something is implicated, or even asserted, by it.

5.2 *Semantically Incomplete Sentences*

A second class of pertinent examples involves structures that are unquestionably sentences. As Kent Bach has argued, English contains a large number of sentences that are syntactically complete but semantically incomplete because they express something less than a proposition (e.g., Bach, 1994a, 2001). For example:

(14) Josie is ready.

As with the kind of sub-sentential utterance discussed above, what is said_{min} by this fully sentential utterance is not a complete proposition (...ready for what?). In this case, pragmatic processes plausibly enrich what is said_{min} to produce a full truth-evaluable content.¹³ What is pragmatically conveyed by (14) might be something like the content of (15):

(15) Josie is ready for the game.

Unlike the sub-sentential utterances reviewed above, an utterance of a semantically incomplete sentence *can* be indirectly quoted:

(16)

(a) Buford literally said that Josie is ready.

(b) Buford literally said that Santa Claus wears a red suit.

But *like* the sub-sentential case, what is pragmatically conveyed by an utterance of a semantically incomplete sentence can be cancelled without contradiction:

¹³ Bach prefers the term “implicature” for this kind of case.

(17) Josie is ready, but not for the game.

And again, cancellation of the implicature causes the audience to search for an alternative semantic completion. Once the implicature is cancelled, there is no literal truth-evaluable content to fall back on – nothing that can be contradicted. ‘Josie is ready, but she’s not ready,’ sounds like a contradiction, but only if we semantically complete both clauses in the same way. If the implicature is first cancelled, we are again left grasping for further implicatures.

To be sure, not everyone agrees on these points. Most notably, Emma Borg (2004) and Herman Cappelen and Ernest Lepore (2005) maintain that utterances like (14) have literal, truth-evaluable contents. But consider the way they assign such contents.

Borg argues that utterances like (14) are elliptical. After the unpronounced syntactic material is added, the resulting content is the same as the content of ‘Josie is ready for something’. As Bach (2007) has noted, Borg’s proposal is not always equally plausible. It makes sense to say, looking at Jack, ‘Jack is pleased, but I have no idea what he is pleased about.’ In this case, it is not implausible that ‘Jack is pleased’ means that Jack is pleased about something or other, as Borg maintains. But it seems incoherent to say, ‘Jack is glad, but I have no idea what he is glad about.’ This suggests that ‘Jack is glad’ does not have the content that Borg assigns to it. Whether or not Bach is right about this, we can get the point we need by distinguishing what is said_{min} from what is pronounced. Borg maintains that what is said_{min} by uttering (14) is a truth-evaluable content. But she agrees that for (14) to express such a content, some syntactic material must be added to what is pronounced. And the intuition that what is pronounced does not express a truth-evaluable content is recoverable, as attested by her positing unpronounced syntactic material to yield truth-evaluable content. (For simplicity, we will continue to express our point by saying that by uttering (14), nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min}.)

By contrast, Cappelen and Lepore argue that (14) has a truth-evaluable content without the help of extra syntactic material. Unfortunately, Cappelen and Lepore do not specify what content is expressed by (14). They say that a T-sentence can be given for sentences like (14): ‘Josie is ready’ is true if and only if Josie is (just plain) ready. But as Bach points out (2006), this maneuver begs the question. It presupposes, rather than shows, that every T-sentence provides a truth condition. Instead of actually specifying the content of (14), Cappelen and Lepore simply assume that it has one.

When Cappelen and Lepore try to say more about the content of sentences like (14), they say things like, “What all people who have had enough have in common is that for each there’s something contextually salient that he has had enough of” (Cappelen and Lepore, 2005, 167). This sounds like an admission that *having enough* is a dyadic relation. Evaluating whether a dyadic relation obtains requires considering both relata. Since sentences like (14) and “A has had enough” specify only one of the relata, they are semantically incomplete. At this point, Cappelen and Lepore might wish to fall back onto Borg’s view that sentences like “A has had enough” are elliptical, standing for “A has had enough of something”. Again, that means that more than the uttered sentence is required to assign a truth-evaluable content. Cappelen and Lepore’s difficulty on this point underscores the plausibility of our account: speakers can recover that by uttering sentences like (14), nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min}.¹⁴

¹⁴ Notice that to defend their account of these examples, Cappelen and Lepore appear to assume that every indexical-free declarative sentence expresses a proposition (cf. Bach, 2006). Since this assumption is inconsistent with gappy proposition accounts of empty names, Cappelen and Lepore’s view offers no relief to pragmatic Millians (and other gappy proposition theorists, for that matter).

5.3 Ellipses and Pseudo-Names

It is easy to construct linguistic structures for which a gappy proposition provides a plausible semantics. All it takes is removing the proper name from a sentence and leaving some kind of syntactic gap:

(18)

(a) ___ does not exist.

(b) does not exist.

(c) Does not exist.

Expressions like (18)(a) and (b) are common in tests and quizzes, where dots and blanks are used to request a word. (18)(c) may be used in response to a question such as, ‘What do you think about Santa Claus?’

Since these expressions lack a grammatical subject, it is plausible that they express gappy propositions or at least propositional functions. This is in line with our intuitions about them. Although uttering (18)(a)-(c) seems to implicate at least that *something* doesn’t exist, this implicature can be canceled. Suffice it to consider that the blank or ellipsis may be replaced by ‘nothing’. (Some metaphysicians are fond of asserting that everything exists; if so, then nothing does not exist.) Listeners also feel that strictly speaking, such utterances cannot be contradicted. So nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} by uttering them. It remains to be seen whether listeners treat sentences with empty names the way they treat (18)(a)-(c).

To investigate the semantics of empty names vis-à-vis gappy proposition accounts such as pragmatic Millianism, perhaps the most relevant examples are sentence-like structures that contain, in place of a proper name, a string of characters that looks to some extent like a proper name, even though it is not in the language. By ‘a string of characters that is not in the

language’, we mean a string of characters that is not in dictionaries, encyclopedias, and most likely, even in any phone directory or other list of proper names. Obviously, competent speakers cannot be expected to know for sure whether a string of characters belongs in the language in this sense. But they can make reasonable guesses, as in the following cases:

(19)

- (a) Santa Claus does not exist.
- (b) Shmanta Shmaus does not exist.
- (c) Xuphy Kishtraa does not exist.
- (d) zxavyw uyiy does not exist.
- (e) sdfsd sdf does not exist.
- (f) #^*g~# does not exist.

The above sentences and pseudo-sentences fall along a continuum. At one end, (19)(a) contains a genuine proper name – a name that belongs in the language. At the opposite end, (19)(f) contains a string of characters that is easily recognizable as a non-word, either in English or in any other likely language. The others fall somewhere in between. None of them contains an established proper name, but what they contain in its place looks less and less like a proper name, or any other kind of word, the further we go down the list.¹⁵ Almost all ordinary speakers judge (19)(a) to be true, and a fortiori truth-evaluable. We will discuss whether this judgment is misguided in the next section. What about (19)(b)-(f)?

¹⁵ Well, ‘Shmanta Shmaus’ is probably a genuine word in at least some dialects of English, because it can be generated from Santa Claus via the morphological rule that, roughly speaking, ‘shm’ may be prefixed to any ordinary word to yield a new word. It would be interesting to consider the semantics of ‘shm-’ words in detail, but we will not pursue this here.

Since each of (19)(b)-(f) contains a string that is not in the language, it is plausible that (19)(b)-(f) are semantically incomplete – that they express less than a truth-evaluable content. To investigate this possibility, we conducted an informal survey of 45 speakers (Table 1). We asked our subjects to evaluate the semantic value of the sentences in (19) as well as some other sentences, all of which contain well-established empty names. We asked our subjects to judge whether the sentences are true, false, or have no truth value (NTV). If they didn't know how to answer, we asked them to answer, “don't know” (DN).

	TRUE		FALSE		NTV		DN/Depends		Tot.
Santa Claus brings presents to children	24	53.33%	16	35.56%	0	0.00%	5	11.11%	45
Santa Claus is fat	37	82.22%	3	6.67%	2	4.44%	3	6.67%	45
Santa Claus is skinny	2	4.44%	40	88.89%	2	4.44%	1	2.22%	45
Mickey Mouse is a mouse	36	80.00%	7	15.56%	0	0.00%	2	4.44%	45
Mickey Mouse is a donkey	1	2.22%	41	91.11%	2	4.44%	1	2.22%	45
(19)(a) Santa Claus doesn't exist	39	86.67%	3	6.67%	2	4.44%	1	2.22%	45
(19)(b) Shmanta Shmaus doesn't exist	15	33.33%	2	4.44%	13	28.89%	15	33.33%	45
(19)(c) Xuphy Kishtraa doesn't exist	12	26.67%	3	6.67%	11	24.44%	19	42.22%	45
(19)(d) zxawyw uyiy doesn't exist	9	20.00%	3	6.67%	24	53.33%	9	20.00%	45
(19)(e) sdfsd sdf doesn't exist	9	20.00%	3	6.67%	26	57.78%	7	15.56%	45
(19)(f) #^g~# doesn't exist	9	20.00%	3	6.67%	25	55.56%	8	17.78%	45

Table 1. For each sentence, 45 subjects were asked whether it's true, false, has no truth value (NTV), or they didn't know (DN). A few subjects answered “it depends”; we added their answers to the DN answers. For each possible answer, the first column contains the absolute number of answers.

As expected, subjects have no trouble assigning truth values to ordinary sentences containing empty names – they almost never answer that such sentences lack a truth value. Things begin to change when we ask subjects about (19)(b)-(f). About one quarter of our subjects judged that (19)(b) and (19)(c) lack a truth value. More than half of our subjects answered that (19)(d)-(f) lack a truth value. Only about one quarter to one third of our subjects assigned a truth value to (19)(b)-(f). This is direct evidence that at least utterances of (19)(d)-(f) say_{min} nothing truth-evaluable, and that intuitions to that effect are easily recoverable.

Some speakers say they don't know the truth value of some of (19)(b)-(f). Most commonly, they say they don't know the truth value of (19)(b) and (19)(c), whose grammatical subjects look morphologically similar to a proper name. This is further evidence that the more a word looks like a proper name, the more subjects are inclined to treat it as meaningful, even though there is reason to believe that the word has no referent.¹⁶

In conclusion, semantically incomplete utterances – whether fully sentential, pseudo-sentential, or sub-sentential – provide good examples in which something interpretable is uttered but nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min}. Speakers *can* use incomplete utterances to get across fully propositional, cancellable, conversational implicatures. What the semantically incomplete utterances reviewed above have in common is that when nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min}, there is no possibility of contradiction and there is no recoverable or reportable content that counts as what is said_{min}. When the pragmatically imparted propositions are canceled, listeners may search and search for what is said_{min}, but they don't recover any truth-evaluable content from the uttered words alone. The plausible conclusion is that nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} by such utterances. If pragmatic Millianism is correct, these are the features we should also expect from utterances containing empty names.

¹⁶ What about the subjects who still assign a truth value? How do we explain their judgments? Some of them might be confusing the pragmatically imparted propositions with the semantically expressed ones, along the lines of pragmatic Millianism. Some of them might be interpreting the sentences in a non-standard way, e.g., as asserting that the word in the subject position does or does not exist. It would be interesting to refine our methodology to explore these questions in more detail. For present purposes, the contrast between the data at the top and those at the bottom of Table 1 is enough evidence to make our point.

6. Cancellation, Contradiction, and Empty Names

Consider the utterances in (20):

(20)

- (a) Santa Claus does not exist.
- (b) Pegasus flies.

According to pragmatic Millianism, what is said_{min} by these sentences is less than a full proposition, but what is pragmatically imparted are descriptive propositions, something like (21).

(21)

- (a) There is no jolly fat man who brings presents to children at Christmas.
- (b) The winged horse of Greek mythology flies.

Adams and co-authors claim that utterances like those in (20) express gappy propositions that conversationally implicate propositions like those in (21). If so, then 1) these implicatures should be cancellable without producing a feeling of contradiction; but 2) once they are cancelled, there ought to be a feeling that the remaining content cannot be contradicted and is not truth-evaluable.¹⁷ If, instead, Taylor and Wyatt's view is correct, then the propositions expressed in (21) represent what is said_{prag}, the input to the process of conversational implicature. If so, then 1) the inference from what is said_{min} to what is said_{prag} should be cancellable without producing a feeling of contradiction¹⁸; but 2) once it has been cancelled, there ought to be a

¹⁷ Adams and Fuller explicitly make the second prediction: an audience faced with the cancellation of the relevant implicature “would, or at least should, hear the antecedent as expressing an incomplete proposition” (2007, 455).

¹⁸ To yield this prediction, Taylor and Wyatt need to assume that the cancellation test can be applied to what is said_{prag} to yield what is said_{min}. This assumption is justified in light of Sections 4 and 5 above, where we argued that what is said_{min} can be recovered via the generalized cancellation test.

feeling that the remaining content cannot be contradicted and is not truth-evaluable. In summary, in spite of some differences in the processes the two theories postulate, both theories make the same predictions. Let's test them.

The sentences in (22) represent an attempt to apply the cancellation test to the sentences in (20).

(22)

(a) Santa Claus does not exist, but there is a jolly fat man who brings presents to children at Christmas.

(b) Pegasus flies, but the winged horse of Greek mythology does not fly.

The first thing to point out about (22) is that the standard intuitions about proper names hold – the sentences do not feel necessarily false (Donnellan, 1970; Kripke, 1980). To put this intuition into sharper relief, compare (22) to (23).

(23)

(a) Santa Claus does not exist, but Santa Claus exists.

(a') There is no jolly fat man who brings presents to children at Christmas, but there is a jolly fat man who brings presents to children at Christmas.

(b) Pegasus flies, but Pegasus does not fly.

(b') The winged horse of Greek mythology flies, but the winged horse of Greek mythology does not fly.

These sentences are straightforward contradictions in a way that those in (22) are not. This confirms the first of the two basic predictions of pragmatic Millianism – the non-singular propositions that are allegedly pragmatically imparted are cancellable without contradiction. However, the psychological reality of what is said_{min} according to pragmatic Millianism is

disconfirmed by the fact that once the implicatures are cancelled, as in (22), there is no feeling that the original clause is not truth-evaluable, which would be evidence that nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} by uttering it. What is said_{min}, intuitively, is still that Santa Claus does not exist, and it is still true. Readers are not left grasping for the meaning in the way that they are when the implicatures of semantically incomplete utterances are cancelled.

It might be objected that the description in the second clause of (22) is not rich enough. Perhaps it only represents a fragment of the descriptive information associated with Santa Claus. If so, then absence of the feeling that nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} is explainable (there are other implicatures to fall back on) and the absence of the feeling that what is said_{min} cannot be contradicted is also explainable (those other implicatures can still be contradicted). But the troublesome intuitions persist no matter how rich we make the descriptions in the cancelling clauses, or how impoverished we make the descriptive information associated with a name.

Suppose we make up the name 'Planet Claire' and tell you that Planet Claire is the only planet with pink air. Now you have a new (empty) name with very little associated descriptive information. On the basis of that, consider these sentences:

(24)

(a) Planet Claire exists, but the planet with pink air does not exist.

(b) Planet Claire has red trees, but the planet with pink air does not have red trees.

Once again, the sentences do not feel necessarily false, in accordance with the standard intuitions about proper names. There is no feeling that after the alleged implicature is canceled, the first clause of each sentence is not truth-evaluable and cannot be contradicted, even though the allegedly canceling clauses contain all the descriptive information associated with the name 'Planet Claire'. Rather, the natural interpretation of the initial clauses of (24)(a)-(b) is that they

can be true just in case Planet Claire has the properties attributed therein (but lacks the properties that we believed it to have, which in this case happen to be the only properties we had in our descriptive information associated with ‘Planet Claire’).

At this point, a committed pragmatic Millian might reply that we still haven’t found the right kind of pragmatically imparted propositions. She might suggest that the right kind of pragmatically imparted propositions must be based on *rigidified* descriptions. Perhaps, if the descriptions entering the pragmatically imparted propositions are suitably rigidified, they will convey enough information. When they are canceled, the result will be a feeling that nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} by uttering the original sentences, and that such sentences cannot be contradicted. According to this revised version of pragmatic Millianism, the propositions pragmatically imparted by (20) look not so much like those expressed by (21) but like those expressed by one of the following pairs:

(25)

(a) This use of ‘Santa Claus’ has no bearer.

(b) The bearer of this use of ‘Pegasus’ flies.

(a’) There is no object at the origin of the causal-historical network that supports this use of ‘Santa Claus’.

(b’) The object at the origin of the causal-historical network that supports this use of ‘Pegasus’ flies.

(a’’) There is no actual jolly fat man who brings presents to children at Christmas.

(b’’) The actual winged horse of Greek mythology flies.¹⁹

¹⁹ The first pair is loosely inspired by Bach, 1994b and 2002 and Katz, 1994; the second pair by Searle, 1983, 258; the third pair by Jackson, 1998 and Perry, 2001. Obviously, we are putting those authors’ ideas to a different use.

This suggestion makes things worse. Consider what happens if we apply the cancellation test using the above sentences:

(26)

(a) Santa Claus does not exist, but the bearer of this use of ‘Santa Claus’ exists.

(b) Pegasus flies, but the bearer of this use of ‘Pegasus’ does not fly.

(a’) Santa Claus does not exist, but the object at the origin of the causal-historical network that supports this use of ‘Santa Claus’ exists.

(b’) Pegasus flies, but the object at the origin of the causal-historical network that supports this use of ‘Pegasus’ does not fly.

(a’’) Santa Claus does not exist, but the actual jolly fat man who brings presents to children at Christmas exists.

(b’’) Pegasus flies, but the actual winged horse of Greek mythology does not fly.

In all these cases, insofar as we can tell, there *is* a feeling of contradiction, or at least serious strain, between the two clauses. This is contrary to the first prediction of pragmatic Millianism: that the pragmatically imparted contents can be cancelled without producing a feeling of contradiction.

Furthermore, the sentences in (25) mention properties like *being the bearer of a name*, *being the origin of a causal-historical network that supports the use of a name*, and *being actual*. These properties are too exotic to figure in a realistic explanation of ordinary intuitions. They are not the kind of property that is likely to be represented during the ordinary process of utterance comprehension. These observations are enough to rule out that the sentences in (25) express propositions pragmatically imparted under ordinary circumstances by the sentences in (20). Hence, they cannot be used to rescue pragmatic Millianism.

Finally, someone might still object that we haven't proven that sentences containing empty names are semantically complete, or that speakers cannot recover intuitions to the effect that nothing is said_{min} by utterances containing empty names. All we have shown is that the cancellation test does not yield such intuitions. For all we've said, the objection concludes, such intuitions may be obtained in other ways.

This objection misconstrues the present dialectic. The starting point is the strong, natural intuition that sentences containing empty names are meaningful and truth-evaluable. The simplest explanation is that such sentences are, in fact, meaningful and truth-evaluable. Pragmatic Millians offer an alternative explanation: the sentences express gappy propositions, which are not truth-evaluable; however, uttering such sentences pragmatically imparts descriptive propositions that drive content intuitions about the original sentences. To support their theory, pragmatic Millians owe us independent evidence that, in fact, nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} by uttering sentences containing empty names.

In this paper, we have made the most sustained effort to date to provide independent evidence on this matter. We have shown that an appropriate use of a generalized cancellation test, with some help from a contradiction test, yields intuitions to the effect that nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} in many cases of utterances where it is independently plausible that they are semantically incomplete. We have then applied the same tests to sentences containing empty names. Contrary to the prediction of pragmatic Millianism, we have found that even after applying the cancellation test, such sentences continue to appear truth-evaluable. By this measure, pragmatic Millianism is empirically disconfirmed. The burden of proof is now on pragmatic Millians. If they wish to defend their theory, they ought to provide evidence,

independent of their theory, to the effect that sentences containing empty names are semantically incomplete.

7. Other Millian Accounts of Empty Names

If sentences with empty names express gappy propositions, then we need an account of the ordinary intuition that such sentences can be true or false. Attempts to locate such an account in pragmatic processing fail to predict and explain some basic intuitions. Such attempts to defend the orthodox Millian view of empty names fail. There are other ways to accommodate empty names within a Millian framework. Might the Millian be able to fall back onto one of them? As we lack the space for a detailed discussion of each option, we will briefly point out why we reject other Millian accounts of empty names.

7.1 Do Gappy Propositions Have Truth Values?

The simplest solution to the present problem is the view that gappy propositions themselves have truth values. How so? The standard way to assign truth values to singular propositions works roughly as follows: a singular proposition $\langle O, P \rangle$, where O is an object and P is a property, is true if O has P ; false if O lacks P . This rule yields no truth values for gappy propositions: since they contain no object O , the question of whether O has P cannot even be raised. But if we generalize our way of assigning truth values to propositions, we can assign truth values to gappy propositions by employing the following rule: a singular proposition $\langle O, P \rangle$ is true if O has P and false otherwise (cf. Braun, 1993, 2005). Under this proposal, (atomic) gappy propositions turn out false; their negations true.

Assigning truth values to gappy propositions has obvious appeal. If gappy propositions have truth values, then the truth values of gappy propositions can explain the feeling that

sentences containing empty names have truth values. For instance, ‘Santa Claus doesn’t exist’ would be true because it expresses the negation of a gappy proposition, which is false.

According to this explanation, we feel that sentences containing empty names have truth values because, in fact, they do. The gappy propositions they express are themselves truth-evaluable. But the present proposal faces problems even worse than pragmatic Millianism. We will briefly mention three.

First, the proposal is ad hoc. It requires a stretch to our ordinary way of assigning truth values to propositions for which there is no independent motivation. As others have pointed out, just because something isn’t true, it doesn’t follow that it’s false. Most things are incapable of being either true or false. Consider tables, cars, and trees. They are simply the wrong kind of thing to carry truth values (cf. Salmon, 1998, 381, note 54). According to Braun’s view, gappy propositions are like tables, cars, and trees in that they can’t be true. But unlike them, they can be (and are) false. This strange behavior calls for an explanation. What, exactly, gives gappy propositions the ability to be false, even though they can’t be true? Braun suggests that what gives them such an ability is that they are propositions: “only propositions, or items that express propositions, can bear truth values” (Braun, 2005, 605). This explanation begs the question.

If gappy propositions can be false because they are propositions, then they should be able to be either true or false, like normal (complete) proposition. But according to Braun, they can only be false, never true. Why? It’s no use to answer that they lack one of the constituents of a singular proposition; that is precisely the reason to conclude that they lack truth values altogether. Gappy propositions do not appear capable of bearing truth values any more than a computer without a central processing unit is able to perform computations (cf. Bach, 2006).

Second, in many cases Braun’s proposal yields the wrong truth values. The most compelling are cases in which it is most plausible that a linguistic structure expresses a gappy proposition. As we discussed in Section 5, there are many examples of semantically incomplete utterances, including utterances like ‘... exists’ and ‘... doesn’t exist’. Yet, while our intuition is that they lack a truth value, Braun’s proposal assigns truth values to them.

Third, as Anthony Everett (2003, Section 3.2) argues, Braun’s proposal has difficulties distinguishing between the content of sentences that allegedly express the *same* gappy proposition. Consider some negative existentials again:

- (1)
 - (a) Santa Claus does not exist.
 - (b) Superman does not exist.
 - (c) Clark Kent does not exist.

Ordinary speakers feel that these sentences differ in content – different things are said by uttering them. Yet according to gappy proposition theories, these sentences all express the same (negated) gappy proposition. Pragmatic Millianism accounts for intuitions to the effect that these sentences say different things in terms of the different propositions pragmatically imparted by the different sentences. Lacking the resources of pragmatic Millianism, Braun may attempt to invoke his view that the same (gappy) proposition may be “believed” in different “ways” (2005; cf. Caplan, 2002, 208; Edwards, forthcoming; and Green, forthcoming). According to him, the same proposition may be grasped or believed in a Santa-Claus-ish way or in a Clark-Kent-ish way – each way corresponding to an intrinsically different belief state.

Appealing to different *ways* of believing the same proposition provides adequate explanations for several related phenomena, including why a rational thinker may believe (1)(b)

while disbelieving (1)(a) or even (1)(c). Such an agent believes (or disbelieves) the same gappy proposition in different ways, without realizing that it's the same gappy proposition (Braun, 2005, Section 3). But as Everett (2003, 12) points out, this explanatory strategy does not work for the case at hand, namely, ordinary speakers' intuition that (1)(a)-(c) say something different even though speakers do realize that neither Santa Claus nor Superman – nor, a fortiori, Clark Kent – exists. The explanatory strategy based on ways of believing relies on the ignorance of the thinker – a presumed epistemic gap between the representation of a gappy proposition and the gappy proposition itself. But the intuition that (1)(a)-(c) say different things persists even after such ignorance is removed. Thus, appealing to different ways of believing a gappy proposition does not explain some ordinary content intuitions about utterances containing empty names.

7.2 *Are Empty Names Really Empty?*

Another solution to the problem of empty names is that appearances notwithstanding, so-called 'empty names' are *not* empty. They refer to abstract objects (Braun, 2005 ; Predelli, 2002; Salmon, 1998; Zalta, 2000).²⁰ This view may be called *abstract Millianism*. Abstract Millians

²⁰ Or perhaps they refer to nonexistent objects, as Meinongians maintain (Meinong, 1904; Parsons, 1980; Priest, 2005). But Meinongianism appears incompatible with Millianism. Since nonexistent objects don't exist, it's hard to see how they could be a part of the singular propositions that, according to Millians, are expressed by sentences containing empty names. Furthermore, it is implausible that Meinongianism applies to all empty names: some name-looking words, like our 'Xuphy Kishtraa', are so made-up that even Meinongians should balk at postulating a non-existent entity for them to refer to. Meinongians should expect that such words would be treated by ordinary speakers as non-words. Yet most people still treat such words semantically as proper names. In our survey, 'Xuphy Kishtraa doesn't exist' was judged true by 26.67% of our subjects and false by 6.67%, while 42.22% answered they didn't know its truth value. Only 24.44% of our subjects answered that the sentence lacks a truth value (Table 1).

agree with Braun that sentences containing empty names have truth values. But according to abstract Millians, the reason is not that such sentences express gappy propositions and gappy propositions have truth values. Rather, the reason is that sentences containing empty names express (ordinary) propositions containing certain abstract objects. As attractive as abstract Millianism may sound, however, it doesn't really solve the problem of empty names.

First, it is unlikely that abstract Millianism applies to all (so-called) empty names. In many cases – such as 'Santa Claus', 'Pegasus', 'Sherlock Holmes', and 'Vulcan' – it is easy to identify the story, myth, or theory that, according to abstract Millianism, gives rise to a corresponding abstract object. But it is always possible to make up new names, like our 'Planet Claire', without embedding them into any story, myth, or theory. In fact, some abstract Millians concede that some names are truly empty: they don't refer to anything (Salmon, 1998). Abstract Millianism does not apply to them. The semantics of (truly) empty names still needs to be worked out.

Second, even when it does apply, abstract Millianism usually predicts the wrong truth values. For instance, the sentences in (1) appear to be true: most of us agree that Santa Claus and Superman don't exist. But according to abstract Millians, this is wrong: 'Santa Claus', 'Superman' and 'Clark Kent' refer to abstract objects, and abstract objects exist. Thus, according to abstract Millianism, Santa Claus and Superman do exist, and the sentences in (1) are false (cf. Everett 2007). By the same token, most of us are prepared to agree that Santa Claus is a jolly fat man who brings presents to children at Christmas (Table 1). Abstract Millians disagree: abstract objects are not jolly, fat, or human, and they do not bring presents to children.

Since abstract Millianism disagrees with our semantic intuitions about sentences containing proper names, it does not solve the present problem, which is that of explaining such intuitions.²¹

7.3 Are Speakers Ontologically Sloppy?

Reimer has suggested an alternative explanation, consistent with Millianism. She seems to agree with most Millians that sentences containing empty names express gappy propositions and that gappy propositions have no truth values. She adds that speakers, when evaluating sentences containing empty names, unreflectively think that (i) there are things that don't exist and (ii) speakers can refer to such things (Reimer, 2001a, b). Her proposal assumes that ordinary speakers treat 'there is an X' and 'X exists' in semantically distinct ways. But unlike Meinongians properly so called, Reimer does not claim that in fact, there are things that don't exist. (She occasionally expresses neutrality on whether there are nonexistent objects that are the referents of empty names, but this doesn't affect the present discussion.) All she claims is that when evaluating sentences containing empty names, speakers behave approximately as Meinongians. For instance, although utterances of 'Santa Claus does not exist' literally say nothing (because the uttered sentence expresses a gappy proposition), speakers think the

²¹ Abstract Millianism also generates a host of ontological problems of its own. Since we lack the space to discuss them, we limit ourselves to a list: (1) Some fictional entities, such as the largest positive integer, are clearly abstract. But most of them, such as Santa Claus and Superman, are supposed to participate in concrete events that take place in space and time. They don't seem to be abstract entities at all. (2) To make abstract Millianism work, it is necessary to specify which abstract objects are the referents of the relevant names. Sometimes this is difficult to do without generating pernicious ontological indeterminacies or violating the laws of logic and identity (Everett, 2005). (This second objection applies to Meinongianism too.) (3) Whether abstract objects exist at all is controversial (Field, 1989; Burgess and Rosen, 1997; Dorr, 2007).

sentence is true because unreflectively, they think that there is a Santa Claus even though they believe Santa Claus does not exist; in addition, they think they can refer to Santa Claus, and since they believe Santa Claus does not exist, they conclude that the uttered sentence is true.

The main difficulty with this proposal is obvious even to Reimer. If the source of speakers' intuitions is lack of reflection on their part, such intuitions should go away upon reflection. Upon reflection, we should recover that nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min}. But even upon reflection, ordinary speakers retain their original intuitions. Reimer acknowledges this difficulty but replies that even when reflecting on such sentences and eliciting those intuitions, there is still "one unreflective moment" during which we take ourselves to refer to things that we believe do not exist (2001a, 500). The only way to get at the correct intuitions, she says, is to endorse Millianism (plus the metaphysical assumption that there is nothing that doesn't exist) and use Millianism to generate alternative intuitions. Reimer correctly concludes that the Millian intuitions resulting from this procedure cannot be used, in turn, to support her proposed explanation of the ordinary intuitions.

Still, what's the positive evidence for Reimer's account? What evidence is there that even the most reflective and theoretically uncommitted speakers still retain, for one unreflective moment, the assumption that they are referring to things that they believe don't exist? How long is such a moment? What causes it to occur? Why don't the intuitions go away after the unreflective moment is over? Reimer's account is ingenious. But in the absence of further details and evidence for her account, there is no reason – independent of Millianism itself – to accept it.

Furthermore, Reimer's theory makes some implausible assumptions about ordinary speakers. As we pointed out, her account requires that ordinary speakers distinguish between the

meanings of ‘there is an X’ and ‘X exists’, so that they can make the assumption that there are things that don’t exist. What’s the evidence for this assumption? In the relevant respects, ordinary speakers appear to use ‘there is’ and ‘there exists’ interchangeably. For one thing, they find sentences like, “there is no Santa Claus,” as intuitively true as sentences like, “Santa Claus doesn’t exist.” To support her theory, Reimer should provide evidence that ordinary speakers treat ‘there is an X’ and ‘X exists’ differently in the relevant respects. For now, Meinongianism is dubious enough as ontology – as a theory of semantic competence, it is unlikely in the extreme (cf. Wyatt, 2007).

8. Towards an Adequate Theory of Names

Millianism about empty names is unwarranted and untenable. If sentences containing empty names expressed gappy propositions, as strict Millians maintain, it should be possible to generate intuitions that nothing truth-evaluable is said_{min} by uttering them. By employing Grice’s cancellation test, we have shown that such intuitions arise for many utterances. Unfortunately, utterances that contain empty names are not among them. After a sustained effort to test Millianism about empty names, we must conclude against it.

As an alternative, we favor a theory along the lines of Richard Larson and Gabriel Segal’s (1995, see also Segal, 2001). Since we don’t have room to develop our own theory, we will briefly explain speakers’ intuitions about sentences containing empty names in terms of Larson and Segal’s theory.

According to Larson and Segal, speakers interpret public language utterances by constructing mentalese sentences that express their meaning. In the case of sentences containing empty names, the corresponding mentalese sentences contain a concept that corresponds to the empty name. For instance, the name ‘Santa Claus’ is translated into a special mentalese concept,

which we may call ‘SANTA CLAUS’. Thus, the public language sentence ‘Santa Claus does not exist’ is translated into a mentalese sentence approximately of the form, ‘SANTA CLAUS DOES NOT EXIST’. The mentalese translations of empty names are meaningful if and only if they are associated with a file of descriptive information. In the case of SANTA CLAUS, such a file would presumably contain information to the effect that Santa Claus is a jolly fat man, lives at the North Pole, brings presents to children at Christmas, and doesn’t exist.

Although much of what Larson and Segal say is consistent with Millianism (cf. Adams and Dietrich 2004), there is a crucial difference: the public language names are meaningful if and only if their mentalese translations by competent speakers are meaningful. Since mentalese concepts can be meaningful whether or not they have a referent, it follows that public language names can be meaningful even though empty. Within Larson and Segal’s framework, the meaning of proper names is given by axioms like, “for all x , ‘Santa Claus’ refers to x if and only if $x = \text{Santa Claus}$ ”.²² Since the axioms are neutral on whether names refer, empty names are just as meaningful as referring ones. The theory is formulated using a free logic, so that there is no rule of existential generalization that applies to all axioms for proper names.

Larson and Segal’s theory is not a traditional descriptive theory of names. They do not claim that the descriptive information associated with a mentalese concept *gives the meaning* of the name it translates. They don’t even claim that such descriptive information enters the

²² Actually, this formulation of the axiom is due to Mark Sainsbury, whose theory of names is similar to Larson and Segal’s (Sainsbury, 2005). Larson and Segal’s axiom reads, “for all x , x satisfies ‘Santa Claus’ if and only if $x = \text{Santa Claus}$ ”. Larson and Segal’s use of the term ‘satisfies’ has the undesirable implication that proper names are predicates. Aside from this detail, we prefer Larson and Segal’s theory because unlike Sainsbury’s, theirs is embedded in a naturalistic, cognitive psychological framework.

representation of the meaning of the sentence in the speakers' mind. Nor does their theory claim that the descriptive information associated with a mentalese concept *determines the referent* of the name. On the contrary, the referent of a mentalese concept is typically borrowed from the public language name it translates (Segal, 2001). The referent of the public language name, in turn, is determined via the kind of process postulated by causal-historical theories of reference (Donnellan, 1970; Kripke, 1980). Thus, in Larson and Segal's theory, the mentalese concepts that translate proper names behave semantically like rigid designators.

Since the semantic content of empty names is given by their mentalese translations, and since such mentalese translations can be meaningful even when the public language names they translate have no referent (because the concepts they contain have descriptive information associated with them), sentences containing empty names are meaningful too. Furthermore, sentences containing empty names have truth values, which speakers assign on the grounds of the descriptive information they associate with the mentalese translations of the empty names.

Thus, speakers have the intuition that uttering 'Santa Claus does not exist' is a way of saying that Santa Claus does not exist. This is because the mentalese translation of 'Santa Claus does not exist' has approximately the same form and contains a meaningful concept, which is different from other meaningful mentalese concepts such as those that translate 'Superman', 'Clark Kent', etc. In this way, Larson and Segal can explain speakers' intuitions concerning sentences that contain empty names without running into the difficulties canvassed in this paper. We believe Larson and Segal's theory can be improved upon. But that will have to await another occasion.²³

²³ To begin with, we would amend the theory by specifying that the mentalese concepts that translate empty names are *linguistic* concepts in the sense of Piccinini and Scott, 2006.

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