



**Beyond Baptism: Filipino Naming Practices and Kripke's Theory of Rigid Designation**

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Saul Kripke's theory of proper names as rigid designators, introduced in his work *Naming and Necessity*, is widely regarded as a foundational contribution to contemporary philosophy of language and reference. Against predominantly descriptivist theories, Kripke argues that proper names refer through a causal-historical chain originating in an initial "baptism," rather than by virtue of associated descriptions (Kripke, 1980). Once fixed, a proper name rigidly designates the same individual in every possible world where that individual exists. This framework has been significantly influential, particularly for its rejection of descriptivism and its clarification of the relationship between reference, necessity, and modality. Crucially, Kripke's account aims to capture the underlying structure of how reference operates in natural language and is not merely descriptive. Despite its theoretical strength, however, Kripke's model also presupposes naming practices that are grounded in relatively narrow and Western linguistic contexts. In this paper, I argue that Filipino naming practices reveal structural limitations in Kripke's account of rigid designation. While these practices do not decisively refute Kripke's theory, they highlight the model's lack of resources to fully explain how reference is established and maintained in culturally rooted contexts.

In light of this topic, I ask the question: How do Filipino naming practices challenge Kripke's theory of rigid designation, and what does this say about the universality of his causal-historical model? To support this argument, I focus on three aspects of Filipino naming culture that underline weaknesses in Kripke's model. Namely: (1) pre-birth and early nicknaming; (2) honorifics; and (3) culturally recognized names like "Tita Baby" and "Tito Boy." I argue that these practices demonstrate forms of successful reference that cannot be fully explained by a single baptismal event or a clearly traceable causal-historical chain. Instead, they suggest that

reference can be socially and relationally constituted, thereby questioning whether rigidity should be treated as a universal feature of proper names.

To clarify the relevance of this critique, it is first necessary to outline Kripke's position more elaborately. Kripke introduces the concept of rigid designation to explain how names function in modal contexts. In this paper, I focus on cultural expressions that function as names in everyday linguistic practice, even if they do not always perfectly fit within the strict Kripkean category of "proper names." According to Kripke, a rigid designator refers to the same object in every possible world in which that object exists. It is unlike definite descriptions, which may pick out different objects in different worlds. Proper names, on Kripke's account, are paradigmatic rigid designators. Their reference is fixed through an initial baptism, either ostensive or descriptive, and then transmitted through a causal chain of communicative usage. It is also worth noting that the continued success of reference does not depend on speakers possessing accurate descriptions of the referent, rather, it depends on their participation in the relevant causal-historical chain. Kripke then uses this framework to explain how names can refer even when speakers are mistaken about multiple properties and attributes of the referent. Moreover, Kripke does acknowledge that individuals can have multiple names and that different linguistic communities may use different names for the same referent. However, these cases are still understood as involving diverse causal chains, with each ultimately anchored in an originating act of naming. The idea that reference flows from a fixed historical source remains central, and it is precisely this assumption that Filipino naming practices complicate.

Kripke's account is further supported by his discussion of necessary a posteriori truths, particularly in cases of identity. Drawing on the example of "Hesperus" and "Phosphorus," when two names refer to the same object, the identity between them remains true in every possible world in which that entity exists, even though this is discovered through empirical investigation. This follows from the fact that both names rigidly designate the same entity. Through this claim, it is highlighted that there is a separation of epistemic access from metaphysical status. Speakers may come to know the identity through experience, but the relation itself is still not contingent. Rigidity, in this sense, grounds the necessity of identity statements without being dependent on descriptive knowledge; yet this cross-world stability also displays the extent to which Kripke's framework prioritizes metaphysical consistency over the volatility of actual linguistic practices. This is a trait more apparent when examined alongside naming systems that are specific to culture.

In the Philippine context, first and foremost, it is common for individuals to have multiple co-existing names—including legal names, childhood nicknames, anglicized nicknames, and relational labels such as Ate, Kuya, or Tita—many of which emerge before any formal naming event or baptism. Still, these names alone suffice to establish successful reference within families or communities. For instance, a child may be called "Bebe" by family members even before receiving an official legal name, being born, or identification of biological gender. Such names function referentially in everyday discourse wherein family members successfully coordinate on whom they are talking about, make plans, and attribute properties, even with the absence of any formal baptism. In these circumstances, reference is grounded in shared social recognition rather than a historical naming event. From a Kripkean perspective, one might aim to

retroactively consider these early uses as informal baptisms; but doing so stretches the idea of baptism to the point where it loses explanatory specificity. The success of reference here seems less dependent on a single anchoring event than on ongoing relational practices.

Additionally, honorifics and relational labels such as Kuya, Ate, and Tita further illustrate this point. These terms are not merely descriptive titles, as they function as primary means of reference in many Filipino contexts. Within a family or neighborhood, referring to “Kuya” may uniquely identify a specific individual without any ambiguity, even though the term itself is relational and role-based. To further illustrate, consider the common practice of addressing a campus security guard as “Kuya” within a Filipino school setting. Students, teachers, and other staff may consistently use this term to refer to the same individual, despite having no biological relation to him. At the same time, those same speakers may also use “Kuya” to refer to their own older brothers in a different context. In such cases, a single term is used to successfully refer to various individuals without confusion, as the intended referent is determined by situational context and not a fixed designation. Unlike proper names in Kripke’s sense, these expressions do not appear to rigidly designate the same individual across all possible worlds. Their referential success depends heavily on context, social roles, and shared expectations within a community; and this stability is therefore pragmatic rather than metaphysical. Nonetheless, they appear to succeed in everyday communication. This shows that rigid designation is not a necessary condition for reference, even for expressions that function like names in practice.

Furthermore, more particularly revealing examples are the culturally familiar figures of “Tita Baby” and “Tito Boy.” In many Filipino families, “Tita Baby” refers to a specific middle-

aged or older female relative, while “Tito Boy” is the male counterpart. At the same time, it is also widely recognized that multiple other families have their own “Tita Baby/Tito Boy.” So much so that Ryan Pronstroller, a drag performer who competed in the third season of *Drag Race Philippines*, also chose “Tita Baby” as her drag queen name as a tribute to the women she considered her titas while growing up, adding that she was inspired as she had numerous “Tita Baby”s during her childhood. To add to that, while “Tito Boy” is another name present in various Filipino families, it is also commonly associated with the Filipino television personality Eugenio “Boy” Romera Abunda Jr. or simply Boy Abunda. These names are thus both particular and repeatable, uniquely identifying an individual within a given social circle while lacking any claim to uniqueness across contexts. When viewed from a Kripkean standpoint, this is puzzling. There is no single baptismal event that fixes “Tita Baby/Tito Boy” as referring to a lone individual across a broader linguistic community. Reference is achieved through localized social practices instead. The same name form participates in many independent referential practices without collapsing into ambiguity within those practices.

At this point, a defense from Kripke’s side might be that these examples do not actually concern proper names in the strict philosophical sense. The objection may say that honorifics and nicknames are not genuine counterexamples because Kripke’s theory is meant to apply only to proper names as rigid designators. This response, however, gives light to a deeper issue. In actual linguistic practice, the boundary between proper names and other referring expressions is not always entirely clear. Filipino naming culture in particular shows that many expressions function as names, through guiding reference and sustaining communication, without conforming to the theoretical criteria that Kripke imposes. If the theory must exclude a wide range of ordinary

referential practices in order to preserve its core arguments, then its scope may be more limited than what is often assumed. A more developed defense of Kripke might attempt to preserve the theory by expanding on the notion of baptism to include informal or gradually established naming practices. On this argument, there may still exist an initial moment at which a name becomes associated with a referent within a community despite the absence of a clearly identifiable naming event, but this expansion risks diluting the explanatory force of the concept. If any successful instance of reference can be treated as evidence of an implicit baptism, then the distinction between reference-fixing and reference-using becomes uncertain. Alternatively, one might argue that expressions such as “Tita Baby” and “Tito Boy” fall beyond the domain of proper names altogether. I would contend that this raises further concerns regarding the scope of the theory, as it excludes forms of reference that are both widespread and functionally equivalent to naming practices in everyday discourse. In either case, the attempt to maintain Kripke’s framework shows a divergence between conceptual rigor and how reference functions in actual human practice.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Kripke’s theory is fundamentally mistaken. His insights into rigidity, necessity, as well as the failure of descriptivism remain powerful and relevant, particularly for understanding how names operate in modal reasoning. Despite that, the cases within the Filipino context imply that rigidity is not a universal feature of all name-like expressions; and that causal-historical chains are not the only mechanisms by which reference can be established. Rather than treating these cases as anomalies, it may be more productive to view them as evidence that reference is a socially mediated phenomenon that is shaped by cultural norms and pragmatic contexts.

The broader implication of this critique is methodological. Analytic philosophy of language has often sought universal accounts of meaning and reference, those of which are abstracted from particular social contexts. Filipino naming practices become obstacles to this approach by showing that culturally specific practices can uncover limitations in otherwise seemingly cogent theories. A more comprehensive account of reference may need to integrate Kripke's causal discernments with emphasis on social roles, pragmatic coordination, and communal recognition. Such an account would not abandon rigidity altogether; but would situate it as one way of establishing reference rather than as the defining feature of how names function.

To conclude, Filipino naming practices do not outright refute Kripke's theory of rigid designation, but they do expose its limitations in the cultural and conceptual sense. By examining practices such as pre-birth nicknaming, honorifics, and relational names, this paper has shown that stable and successful reference can occur without a single baptismal event, a causal-historical chain that could clearly be traced, or rigid designation across all possible worlds. These cases, therefore, suggest that reference is often socially and relationally constituted; and that it relies on shared practices and recognition within communities rather than metaphysical rigidity. Kripke's framework, I believe, remains effective and significant for elaborating on reference in modal contexts and rejecting descriptivism; yet it appears less equipped to account for the diversity of naming practices found across not just Filipino practices, but also multiple cultures. I do not think recognizing this limitation completely diminishes Kripke's contribution to the philosophy of language, rather, it invites a more pluralistic perspective to reference. An approach that, instead of as a universal condition of how names function in the linguistic life of

humankind, frames rigidity as one historically and culturally constructed mechanism among many; through which reference can be reinforced.

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