

MIESZKO TAŁASIEWICZ*

MENTAL FILES. TRIGGERING MECHANISMS, METADATA AND ‘DISCERNIBILITY OF IDENTICALS’

SUMMARY: This paper initially follows the final part of the debate between singularism and descriptivism to the point of convergence, and discusses the notion of acquaintanceless singular thought (such that there is a compromise available between hitherto competing parties). Then a sketch of a mental files model is presented. Firstly, the triggering mechanisms for opening files are discussed. Two kinds of discourse situations, acquaintance-situations (A-situations) and decoding-situations (D-situations), are identified and different triggering mechanisms are postulated for each. Secondly, a bipartite structure of a file is introduced, combining an objectual part, encompassing what traditionally has been associated with the notion of a mental file, serving the purpose of storing information about the referent of the file, and a *metadata* part, serving the purpose of storing information about *the file* itself. Being capable of encoding a variety of types of mental files, this structure is then employed to illustrate how singularity/descriptivity of the files can be manipulated (as in the case of descriptive names) and how we can account for the cognitive discernibility of files containing identical objectual information and grounded with the same acquaintance relations.

KEYWORDS: François Récanati, singularism/descriptivism, acquaintanceless thoughts, difference solo numero, metadata

* University of Warsaw, Institute of Philosophy. E-mail: m.talasiewicz@uw.edu.pl

In 2012, François Récanati described his Mental Files framework (MF) with the explicit aim of defending Singularism against Descriptivism. However, it is arguable that MF could bridge the gap and *unite* Singularism and Descriptivism.

To characterise the notion of semantic singularity (SEMS), we might say, after Récanati, that ‘whenever a thought has singular truth-conditions, the following schema holds:

(SEMS) There is an object x such that the thought is true with respect to an arbitrary possible world w if and only if, in w , ... x ...’ (Récanati 2012, p. 15).¹

Semantic descriptivism (SEMD) would express itself in schemata which embed the idea of identifying an object x as something satisfying a predicate F in the truth-conditions of a thought about object x . It is widely held that the closest approximation to singularism a descriptivist can obtain (in the form of the so-called Rigidified Two-Dimensional Descriptivism) is something like:

(SEMD) There is an object x **such that $F(x)$** , such that the thought is true with respect to an arbitrary possible world w if and only if, in w , ... x ...

These semantic schemata, however, are not quite adequate tools for expressing what is at stake in the singularism-descriptivism debate. Actual descriptivists, among whom I would count Strawson and Searle, have explicitly endorsed SEMS, not SEMD:

“In general, the contribution that a name makes to the truth conditions of statements is simply that it is used to refer to an object” (Searle 1983, p. 258).

“In an appropriate setting the name, as used, will act as an ideal or Russellian proper name” (Strawson 1974, p. 47).

Their descriptivism is epistemological rather than semantic in nature.² As Searle would put it, “The issue is most emphatically not

¹ (SEMS) label is mine, not Récanati’s.

² For a complete view it might be worthwhile to consider metaphysical versions of singularism and descriptivism (or better ‘particularism’ and ‘anti-particularism’). As an instance of metaphysical anti-particularism, Récanati takes the view that objects are bundles of properties (Récanati 2012, p. 4). Actually, I am not sure whether this should count as a metaphysical analogy of descriptivism at all. This is a stance within the controversy on what constitutes an object: is there

about whether proper names must be exhaustively analysed in completely general terms” (Searle 1983, p. 232). He would not endorse the thesis that all thoughts are general in the sense of *not* conforming to the singular schema, but would rather take a stance about what the epistemic conditions are in which the schema – the singular schema – can hold at all. What does it mean for a subject to have a singular thought, a thought as such that ‘there is an object x such that the thought is true with respect to an arbitrary possible world w if and only if, in w , ... x ...’? Epistemological singularism (EPS) and epistemological descriptivism (EPD) stress different points here:

- (EPS) The subject must *be in some external relation* with that object;
 (EPD) The subject must *have some internal content* identifying that object (not necessarily descriptive or even verbal at all).

There is no contradiction though. Both views can be held together and can be true together: there is nothing incoherent in Strawson’s view, according to which “any reflective speaker will acknowledge that he cannot have *meant* a particular item by the use of a name on a particular occasion unless he had *some* identifying *knowledge* of that item; and he could not (in general) have acquired such knowledge save by a *causal* route originating in some fact about the particular concerned” (Strawson 1974, p. 49).³

a sort of substratum needed, or would a mere bunch of properties do? Suppose we decide that a mere bunch is enough. It does not follow that we do not have singular objects. On the contrary, we have objects the easier way – singular, well defined, causally powerful objects, although identified as bundles of properties. Such objects might enter into direct acquaintance with us and thus ground the singularist epistemology.

A better example of a metaphysical view that is somehow analogous to descriptivism would be Searle’s or Putnam’s view that ‘there is not a ready-made world’: “Objects are not given to us prior to our system of representation; what counts as one object or the same object is a function of how we divide up the world. The world does not come to us already divided up into objects; we have to divide it; and how we divide it is up to our system of representation, and in that sense is up to us, even though the system is biologically, culturally, and linguistically shaped” (Searle 1983, p. 231).

³ Récanati will eventually admit the coherence between singularism and descriptivism thus framed: “The thinker stands in a different relation to a primary content than the relation he or she stands in to secondary content. Modulo this distinction between two grasping relations. 2-D Relational Descriptivism can be saved” (Récanati 2013, p. 230).

Admittedly, there used to be a problem for descriptivists: to specify where exactly that identifying content is to be placed/stored/processed – if not in the truth-conditions of a proposition. Perhaps it was this problem that led some philosophers to maintain that there is a connection between semantic and epistemological theses and that SEMD is all an epistemological descriptivist can have in semantics, regardless of what he or she would want or declare.⁴ Descriptivists were well aware of this weakness in their stance and worked hard to overcome it. Early attempts were connected with the so-called presupposition accounts, on which I will not comment here. Later, from the seventies on, they started to elaborate on a much more promising account, which is now called ‘Mental Files’.

MF (as hereby further known) addresses the problem most directly and comprehensively: the required internal content is truly separated from the truth-conditions of a proposition and stored in the files. From this angle, MF turns out to be a backup for descriptivism rather than singularism: it allows for the relieving of truth-conditional semantics from the burden of encoding the required identifying content, thus for having epistemological descriptivism united with genuine semantic singularism. Both sides can get what they are after: semantically singular thoughts and mediating content for every thought (descriptive and singular alike). No wonder early developments of this framework were due to descriptivists seeking adequate concepts to express their stance properly, notably Strawson (1974).

Yet Récanati’s intuition that MF would facilitate singularism would have its merits, too. One of the problems is whether epistemological singularity (EPS) – consistent, as we have seen, with epistemological ‘descriptivity’ but stronger than it – is really a necessary condition for the availability of semantic singularity (SEMS). Or, in other words, whether there are acquaintanceless singular thoughts.⁵

⁴ Arguably, SEMD entails SEMS: it is a stronger condition. The phrase ‘(SEMD) is all a descriptivist can have’ means that he or she cannot build the semantics of singular expressions on weaker grounds (thanks to an anonymous referee for bringing this point to my attention).

⁵ Nota bene: this has nothing to do with the singularism/descriptivism debate: the possibility of a singular thought about an object without actual acquaintance with that object is equally doubtful for singularists and descriptivists. That it is

In principle Récanati's answer is no (let us call it 'Acquaintance Thesis' (AT)):

- (AT) '1. The subject cannot entertain a singular thought about an object *a* without possessing, and exercising, a mental file whose referent is *a*.
2. To possess and exercise a mental file whose referent is *a* the subject must stand in some acquaintance relation to *a*' (Récanati 2012, p. 155).

However, there is a recurrent intuition that in some cases – e.g. in the case of the so-called descriptive names – there is at least some air of singularity in thoughts containing such names despite the absence of actual acquaintance with the names' referents.⁶ How can we account for it? Récanati, as it turns out, would not take AT at face value, but announce that "this is a normative claim" (*ibidem*, p. 156).

Normativity has many faces though. What exactly does it mean in this case? There is a moral/legal sense of normativity, for instance. Something may happen against the (moral) law. In this sense one can possess and exercise a mental file without an acquaintance, just like one can exercise someone's property without the owner's consent, only it is immoral or illegal. Quite obviously it is not the intended notion of normativity.

Another sense is connected with definitions. In this case norms determine certain identity conditions of some social or linguistic entities by specifying what is required for an object to belong to a certain kind (or to satisfy a certain sortal predicate). According to this notion of normativity, what does not conform to a norm does not exist, under a given sortal. In this sense – if AT is right – we cannot possess and exercise a mental file without an acquaintance (perhaps something else appears in our heads instead, but not a mental file).

doubtful for singularists is no surprise. But it is also doubtful for descriptivists. As I have stressed, descriptivists can discriminate between singular and general thoughts and they can adopt acquaintance as a criterion for this distinction, if they consider this the right thing to do. Thus, the problem of acquaintanceless singular thought is a problem of adequate expression of the notion of singular thought rather than a controversy between singularism and descriptivism. This is an internal problem of singularism, a problem of a relation between semantic and epistemological versions of this stance.

⁶ See e.g. Reimer 2004; Jeshion 2004; Kanterian 2009.

This time it is not at all clear that it is not the intended notion of normativity. Récanati approvingly quotes Zeno Vendler, saying that “the fact that a tool can be misused does not alter the function of the tool” (*ibidem*, p. 158), but this stance has its limitations, namely the tool must be identifiable independently of the role it actually plays. A rake remains a rake when used as a weapon in a neighbourhood quarrel only because we can provide a definition of a rake, independent of the function of raking (e.g. an ostensive one – a rake is something like *this*). Récanati does not give us a normal definition, but he defines mental files through meaning postulates: ‘Mental files are based on what Lewis calls “acquaintance relations”, “The characteristic feature of the relations on which mental files are based, and which determine their reference, is that they are *epistemically rewarding*”’ (*ibidem*, p. 34–35). Actually, these sound very much like the norms specifying conditions of identity and if something does not fulfil these norms it excludes itself from under the sortal ‘mental file’.⁷

We can move on only if we decide to weaken the meaning postulates for ‘mental files’ so that they would express the notion that “a mental file serves as a storehouse of information that the subject takes (consciously or not) to be about the same object” (or something like that). The stronger phrases, stating that mental files are based upon acquaintance relations, are no longer meaning postulates, so it is possible now to deny factual acquaintance without the file no longer being a file.

Yet, in the 2012 exposition of Récanati’s account, without the acquaintance, we can have at most what he would call a ‘singular thought-vehicle’. He would insist that “opening a mental file itself is *not* sufficient to entertain a singular thought (in the sense of thought-content)” (Récanati 2012, p. 164). And in such a case “no semantically evaluable thought is expressed” (*ibidem*, p. 160).

However, there are good reasons to believe that some sort of thought-content should be allowed in acquaintanceless cases. As Tim Crane noticed, it is hard to maintain that Le Verrier, when thinking about Vulcan, “was not thinking anything, merely airing an empty ‘vehicle’” (Crane 2011, p. 39). Besides, it is not easy to tell which cases are acquaintance-less and which acquaintance-full: “There are

⁷ Similar worries are expressed in Pagin 2013.

many distinctions we can make between kinds of knowledge, and the thoughts we have about things do vary depending on the ways we know these things. However, I am skeptical that any specific way of knowing something lines up systematically with thinking about a particular object as such” (Crane 2011, p. 29). This borderline becomes even more blurred when we consider that there are many kinds of objects we can think about in a singular mode, such that “it is at least controversial whether all these ‘things’ [...] enter into any serious causal relations at all, much less the special (ER) ones that Récanati needs to sustain ‘acquaintance’” (Hansen, Rey 2016, p. 428).⁸

Récanati in 2012 tried to evade such charges by saying that even if there is no singular thought-content, “this does not mean that the user of the singular term is not thinking anything: there are other thoughts in the vicinity, which the subject is arguably entertaining” (*ibidem*, p. 160). He would namely ascribe ‘*derived, metarepresentational*’ function to these thoughts (*ibidem*, p. 177), as is the case in modelling someone’s propositional attitudes (with the use of the so-called ‘vicarious files’). It does not seem convincing though: “people don’t normally regard words and rainbows as involving deliberate pretense or metarepresentation” (Hansen, Rey 2016, p. 430). And what is more important, the *purpose* of keeping such a strict connection between singular thought-content and actual acquaintance, while allowing for acquaintanceless singular thought-vehicles, seems more and more evasive.

Singular vehicles [...] are merely *taken* to provide singular reference by those who entertain them [...]; at best, they are *treated* as providing singular reference (we may imagine a cautious scientist who is not sure about the existence of the entity she is naming). In each case, theirs is only an *appearance* of singularity and it is not clear how one could go from an appearance of singular thought to singular thought proper, in any interesting semantic sense. So if entertaining a singular vehicle comes down to entertaining a *seemingly singular thought* (which is really not a singular thought in any interesting semantic sense), we do not see how this notion could be of help. (Coliva, Belleri 2013, p. 110)

For “what matters is not that the thought happens to refer to just one thing, but that it has a specific *cognitive role*. Singularity is a matter

⁸ Among such an object we might count species, performances, ceremonies, marriages, contracts, companies, stores, clubs, galaxies, black holes, the sky, the wind, the rain, the tide, ocean waves, shadows, reflections, rainbows etc.

of the cognitive – that is, the psychological or phenomenological – role of the thought” (Crane 2011, p. 25).⁹

Eventually, Récanati in 2013 eases his constraint and admits that acquaintanceless thought may have singular *content* albeit only a primary one, as opposed to a secondary (in a two-dimensional sense), which is still lacking (Récanati 2013, p. 208).¹⁰ Accordingly, he reinterprets his distinction of primary and derived functions of the files.¹¹ While in 2012 primary functions are representational and derived functions are metarepresentational (Récanati 2012, p. 177), in 2013 Récanati says that “‘primary’ here must be understood in a new, evolutionary sense” (Récanati 2013, p. 211–212): primary functions are ‘evolutionary basic’ and derived functions are those which have evolved as distinct from them – which no longer carries anything like the presumption of their being ‘metarepresentational’.

⁹ There is a general worry about grounding semantic issues on the swampy grounds of metaphysics. We are accustomed to thinking that when we substitute the name ‘Neptune’ for a description ‘the perturber of the orbit of Uranus’, we only *presume* there is some object causally responsible for our observations (sense data) – ready to be so named – and we are accustomed to thinking that in such a case eventually we may be wrong, as in the case of Vulcan. But, actually, from a general enough point of view, things are quite analogous when it comes to naming directly perceived objects: if Pedro Calderon de la Barca were right, no thought can be truly singular, for ‘Life is a dream’.

Such is the moral from the skeptic’s challenge. Perhaps we cannot tell the external world from a highly sophisticated set of internal data. But the right answer is that we do not need to bother. We shall act as if the world existed and we shall *talk* as if the things we are talking about existed, too. And that is why we do not need to distinguish cognitively singular thoughts (singular vehicles) from ‘really’ singular thoughts (accompanied by actual acquaintance), while no one but God knows which are which. What is important is which thoughts are *meant* to be singular and which are *meant* to be descriptive. And these are matters of vehicles, not contents.

¹⁰ There is a question about the truth value of such thoughts. In 2012 (p. 164) Récanati would hold that “if reference is not achieved, no singular truth-condition is determined and the thought cannot be evaluated as true or false.” But this is just one option of many. Some accounts of truth-conditions may render the proposition in question false, some others as lacking truth value, and yet others perhaps even as true under certain additional conditions (such as the condition that the descriptive content of the predicate is wholly contained in the body of the non-referential file associated with the subject of the sentence – as in the case of ‘Sherlock Holmes lived in London’).

¹¹ Mind the ambiguity of the word ‘primary’ here: primary content vs. secondary content and primary function vs. derived function.

This, I presume, would end the debate. The compromise seems satisfactory to both sides. Along with the unification of singularism and descriptivism and the agreement about acquaintanceless singular thoughts we have quite a bit of consensus in the whole area, as acknowledged by Récanati himself: “I do not think I ever argued for the absolute untenability of the other approaches [...] I believe that, in the end, there is a true convergence” (Récanati 2013, p. 228).

Once we relieve MF of fighting unnecessary battles against a misconstrued enemy, we can move on to raise an array of interesting questions about MF and about the use of MF in semantics.¹² These are quite distinct topics: how to model semantic phenomena using mental files and how to model mental files themselves.

It is widely held – among people entertaining the whole idea of mental files – that mental files are mental particulars. Mental files are commonly regarded as real cognitive entities, relatively independent of semantic issues. For if they were just illustrations of what is going on in semantics, they could not play an explanatory role for semantic phenomena, under the charge of circularity or question-begging. As James Pryor would put it: “I’m assuming that for some explanatory purposes we want to model facts about [...] thinking” (Pryor 2016, p. 321).

A caveat is needed perhaps: mental files are *theoretical objects* rather than empirical ones, much like quarks or strings are theoretical objects of physics: we cannot actually see them, but assuming their existence are out there and having certain properties explains the data within certain theories. Accordingly, assuming the existence of mental

¹² It should be noted that semantics here is taken in a quite broad sense in which it might be understood as a theory of utterance meaning or intended meaning, making use of cognitively real representations and reflecting mental processing of natural language utterances. As with any theory, it must be focused on general mechanisms and role-models rather than particular neuronal activity of flesh and blood speakers and hearers, yet it is arguably less detached from a human cognitive system than some old Frege-style antipsychological objective semantics, devoid of any cognitive aspects whatsoever. Such a broad sense is employed e.g. in Katarzyna Jaszczolt’s Default Semantics, where compositionality is meant to be working on the level of merger representations, which are entities unifying elements of syntax, lexicon, world-knowledge, cultural and social stereotypes, inferential patterns and discourse situation. Such semantics “brings truth-conditional methods closer to cognitive, conceptual analyses” (Jaszczolt 2010).

files *in our minds* and their having certain properties might explain certain phenomena in semantics, while assuming their existence and their having some other properties would help to explain certain phenomena in psychology. Perhaps assuming their existence and their having different properties would contribute to explanations in neurophysiology (of which I am ignorant). These different theoretical perspectives can draw significantly different pictures of what mental files are. Outcomes of one discipline might back up or constrain the pictures in another – which is a customary gain to be expected from interdisciplinary research – yet there is no need to expect, until a universal theory of everything is reached, that these pictures shall be at all points commensurable. And it definitely cannot be demanded that a semanticist shall not speak about mental files (as cognitive entities) unless psychology or neurophysiology have fully established the ‘real’ nature of the files. Semantics is a part of cognitive science – on a par with philosophy, psychology, neurophysiology, informatics etc. – and is fully entitled to postulate (tentatively, as always) certain cognitive entities as having such and such properties.

Eventually, there is a sort of ambiguity in the use of the notion of mental files (as always when theoretical objects are concerned). In one sense, mental files are real entities in our heads, something we have only limited access to and something we try to roughly and tentatively model, from different perspectives. In another sense, mental files are proposed models of these entities, capturing some of the perspectives on these objects but not necessarily all. In this sense it is reasonable to ask if certain perspectives, or certain aspects of our mental processes, can be modelled better in a different way, for instance in a framework of so-called mental graphs.¹³ Those different models are not competing, though, as long as they model different aspects or give the same explanations in areas where they overlap.

In what follows, I will present a sketch of a mental-file-style (as opposed to mental-graph-style) model of cognitive entities called ‘mental files’ and discuss some of its consequences.

As cognitive entities, mental files need to be formed or activated by some triggering cognitive mechanisms. Récanati seems to maintain that it is a matter of a *conscious decision* by the thinker to open a mental

¹³ Pryor 2016.

file, a decision that could be justified and reasonable – or not: “The only *reason* to open a file in [acquaintanceless] cases is that the user expects to stand in the appropriate relation to the referent” (Récanati 2012, p. 158); “the (expected) existence of an information link is what *justifies* opening a file” (*ibidem*, p. 167). However, as soon as we realise that mental files are meant to function, *inter alia*, as a part of tracking systems for visually detected objects (Murez, Récanati 2016, p. 266) we will be bound to reject the idea that mental files as such belong solely to the sphere of the subject’s *conscious* reflection. There are not only *reasons* to open files, there are also *causes*. Files open – or do not – whether we want them to or not. By careful examination of our semantics we can *discover* the Revolutions of the Files, their capacities or tendencies for merging, linking, sharing, etc., but we do not have full access to *manipulating* the files, not directly. Arguably, Récanati is bound to take such an anti-psychologist stance himself, as it is an important part in his argumentation against the circularity objection: “[clustering] It may be entirely a matter of subpersonal binding of information. Thus in the case of proto-files at least it is the cognitive system, not the subject, that takes the pieces of information to concern the same object and cluster them within a file” (Récanati 2012, p. 98).

Definitely, one of the most prominent triggering mechanisms for opening the files would be entering into an acquaintance relation with an external object. However, since effectively an acquaintance with an object is *not* necessary to open *de facto* a mental file, we face an interesting problem: what else, if not solely entering into an acquaintance relation, is a triggering mechanism for opening mental files?

First, let us note that in fact we may find ourselves in two different kinds of discourse situations: situations where the object is given and the use of a word is related to it (acquaintance situations, A-situations), and situations where the word is given and the corresponding object has to be identified (decoding situations, D-situations). I have elaborated this issue a bit more in Tałasiewicz (2010).¹⁴ It may seem similar to the speaker-hearer distinction but it is not. Indeed, usually speakers are in A-situations and hearers are in D-situations. But all combinations are possible. Both speaker and hearer can be in an A-situation

¹⁴ In that paper ‘D’ in ‘D-situations’ stands for ‘descriptive’ – which I consider no longer appropriate, as we can decode singular terms in D-situations.

(when they share actual acquaintance with the object being referred to) and both can be in a D-situation (when they both lack such acquaintance). Moreover, in certain circumstances – usually artificially prepared – speakers can be in D-situations and hearers in A-situations. This is the case e.g. in ‘Blind Date’ type shows, where the speaker speaks about someone he or she cannot see while the audience can see the person very well. Such situations are odd and sometimes funny, but they can and do happen.

What is essential is that there are different cognitive mechanisms involved in language processing in respective situations, especially different triggering mechanisms. When we get, say, a visual stimulus, which usually means that we are entering into an acquaintance relation with some object, and are about to react linguistically to it, we open or activate a mental file for this object. But when we just hear an utterance, without any trace of personal acquaintance with the objects the utterance is about, we do open the files for them, too, but due to a completely different triggering mechanism.

A promising way to search for such a mechanism is to accommodate some of Strawson’s ideas according to which mental files open not only with the prospect of a singular thought, however such thought is conceived, but along with any nominal use whatsoever (Strawson 1974, p. 35–60). According to Strawson, a ‘nominal use’ is a syntactic notion rather than semantic. The very same expression, e.g. some definite description, might be used nominally, as in ‘The tallest mountain in Europe is more than 4000 meters high’, where it is the subject of the sentence, or ascriptively/predicatively as in ‘Mont Blanc is the tallest mountain in Europe’, where it is a part of a predicate.¹⁵ Arguably, a nominal use – a referring use in Strawson’s terminology¹⁶ – can be

¹⁵ This old distinction is accommodated in some quite new developments in MF, for instance by Josef Perner and his colleagues: “Files capture the predicative structure of language and thought: the distinction between what one is thinking/talking of [...] (*individuating* information) and what one thinks/says about it [...] (*predicative* information)” (Perner, Huemer, Leahy 2015, p. 78–79).

¹⁶ Note that Strawson’s ascriptive/predicative use, sometimes even called by him ‘attributive’ (Strawson 1950, p. 13), is something entirely different from Donnellan’s much more recognised attributive use. Donnellan alludes to Strawson’s notion in the following passage: “There are some uses of definite descriptions which carry neither any hint of a referential use nor any presupposition or implication that something fits the description. In general, it seems, these are recogniz-

modelled as belonging to the category of names as construed in classical Categorical Grammar.¹⁷ What triggers the opening of a file would be thus just a grammatical processing of the sentence conducted by the ‘syntactic module’ of our cognitive apparatus aimed at making space for further information, the need for which the module sort of ‘anticipates’ from ‘the frame of the sentence’.

That would require further differentiation among the files in order to account for undeniable differences between singular and general semantics. A syntactic module would produce mental files for general thoughts as well as for singular ones, just as general expressions as well as singular ones might appear in a subject position in sentences. It would be convenient to call the files themselves general and singular, respectively. And it would be reasonable to stipulate that the difference between singular thought and descriptive thought will be somehow represented in the structure of respective files.

Another matter convenient for representation in the structure of the file, is information about the file. Normally, the metaphor of a file evokes a picture of a catalogue card divided into two sections: the heading or the label of the file and the body of the file, where the information about the referent of the file is stored. According to my present proposal, the files should contain information about objects as well as information about *themselves* (metadata). Thus, they should consist of *two* parts, both having a heading and a body of information. A heading – as in a real card file in a library catalogue – serves the purpose of identifying a given body of information (we can have, in principle, many different bodies containing the same information under different headings). The heading of the metadata

able from the sentence frame in which the description occurs. These uses will not interest us” (Donnellan 1966, p. 363). Donnellan’s referential/attributive distinction is a refinement of Strawson’s referring use only. Thus, both referential and attributive uses in Donnellan’s sense belong to what I call ‘nominal use’.

¹⁷ More on that in Tałasiewicz (2014). Interestingly, through Categorical Grammar the MF framework would get related to a Husserlian notion of ‘intentional object’ and thus help to clear up the entanglements of the theory of intentionality and exorcise the spectre of Meinong from the debate. Récanati himself took some preliminary steps in this direction in his discussion of the medieval witchcraft of Peter T. Geach (Récanati 2012, p. 204–205; Geach 1967). Following Récanati, I will leave this point without elaboration, as ‘orthogonal’ to the main line of argument in the paper.

part of the file is a sort of label for the whole file, an image carried through a visual stimulus or a particular wording of a heard sentence that triggered the opening of the file (depending on the triggering mechanism involved). The body of the metadata part of the file would contain some information about opening circumstances, linking and merging history that establishes the internal structure of one's system of the files, indexing/embedding for reporting propositional attitudes, which requires representing other people's files in one's mind, etc. The body of the objectual part of the file is the main storage compartment; it contains all information one has about the object represented by the file, while the heading of the objectual part represents only the reference-fixing information about the file (Fig. 1). Only the content of this heading – not the whole body of information – enters the truth-conditions schema for the thought employing the file.

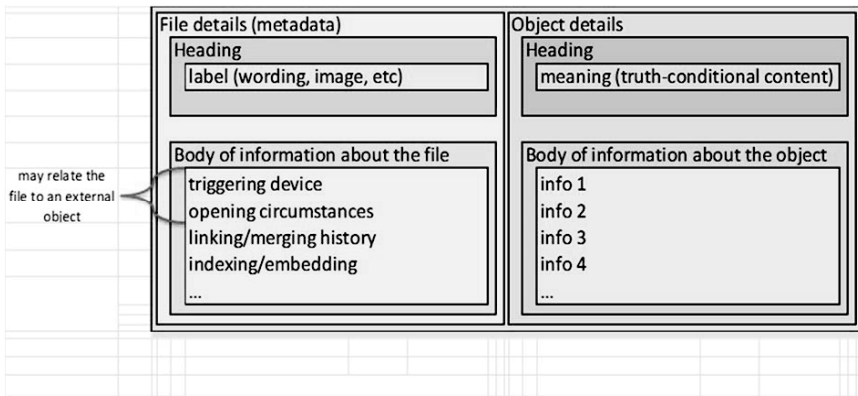


Fig.1. The structure of a file.

The important thing about singular thoughts (Figs. 2, 3) is that no identifying content about the object of reference enters the truth-conditional scheme. We will represent this by leaving the objectual heading of singular files just empty. ‘No’ means ‘no’.¹⁸ But note that

¹⁸ Arguably this is true only about the so-called Spelke-objects: objects individuated by cognitive mechanisms analysing three-dimensional patterns of surface motions. According to Elisabeth Spelke such processes “are not overlaid and obscured by processes for recognizing objects of a multitude of kinds” (Spelke 1990, p. 30) and are crucial in early infant development. However, although such mechanisms are not limited to infancy (as Spelke mentions, “development enriches

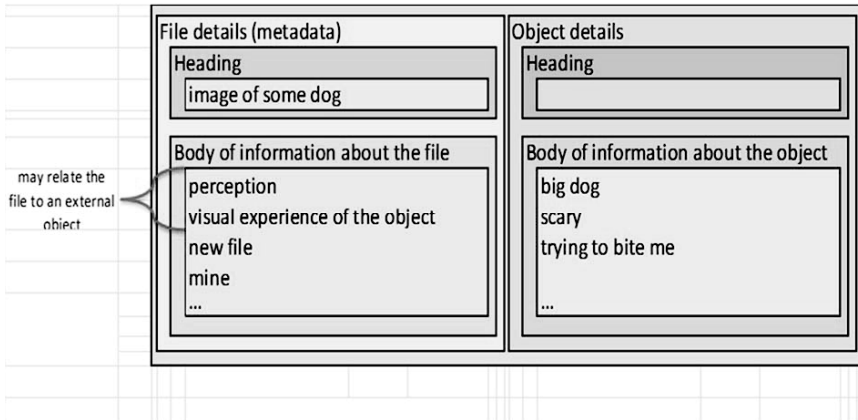


Fig. 2. Singular file triggered by perception.

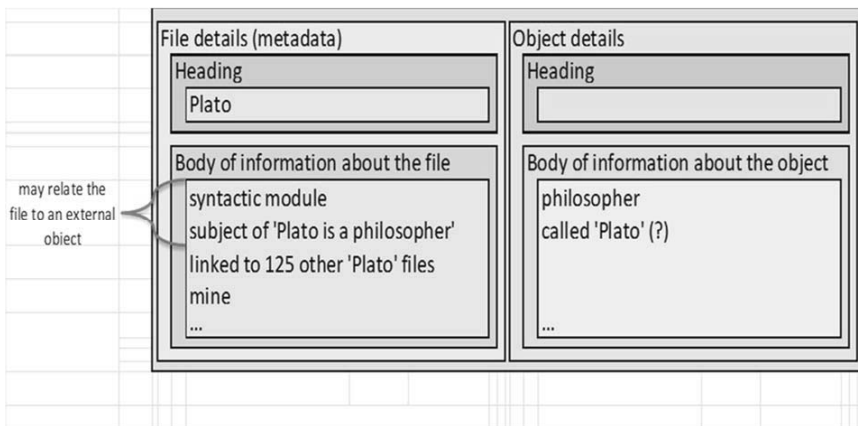


Fig. 3. Singular file triggered by syntactic module.

object perception without fundamentally changing it” so that adults may use such mechanisms too, among others), more sophisticated individuation of objects has to be connected with some categorisation, so that “a mental file for an observed object always incorporates information about as-what an object under discussion is being individuated” (Perner, Leahy 2016, p. 497). If so, it is reasonable to follow Perner’s and Leahy’s suggestion that the headings in non-Spelke singular files are not empty, but rather contain a sortal expression, under which the referents of the files are to be individuated. Such files are still different from descriptive files, whose objectual headings contain not just sortals but uniquely identifying descriptions. For the sake of simplicity, I will refrain from showing this variation on figures in the text [thanks to a referee for drawing my attention to this issue].

this would not dissolve the identity of the file itself, safely preserved by the metadata part of it (including the history of opening which may – or may not, on which I will comment below – relate the file causally to the object of reference).¹⁹

Let us compare this with two different kinds of descriptive files, for plain and rigidified descriptions respectively (Figs. 4, 5).

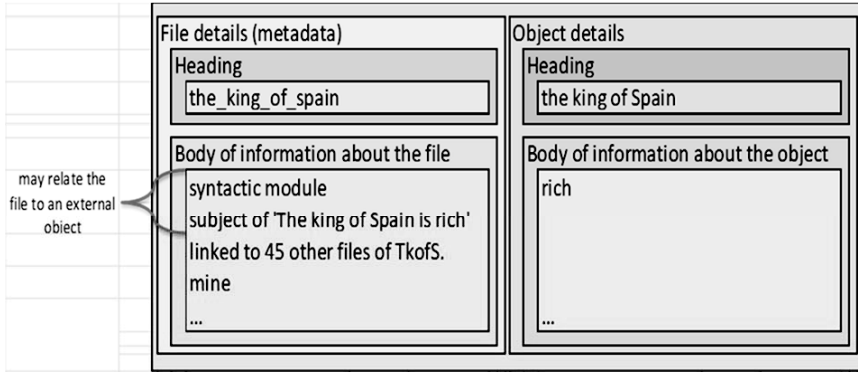


Fig. 4. Descriptive file for plain description.

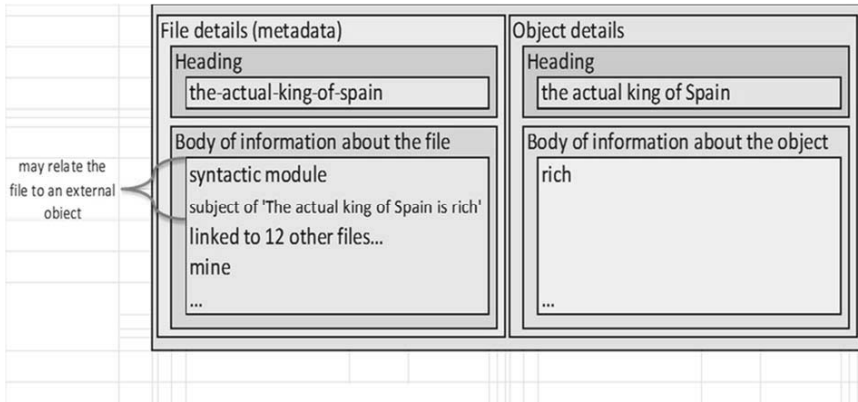


Fig. 5. Descriptive file for rigidified description.

¹⁹ A triggering device plus opening circumstances would constitute what we might call a 'information channel' as in Azzouni (2011).

As we can see, Récanati and others were right to say that a so-called rigidified description is still a description – mere rigidifying would not make the thought singular. There is still a non-empty heading in the objectual part of the file.²⁰

Now, we can have a look at how this bipartite model of mental files can help us to account for certain semantic phenomena. First, let us go back for a moment to the problem of singularity.

Technically we can fit singular files without acquaintance into our model very easily. Singular files are those files which were opened as such, with an empty objectual heading. A triggering mechanism decides whether the file is singular or not and produces accordingly

²⁰ However, there is something misleading in Récanati's account of this. He seems to maintain that the sign of descriptive character of a phrase is the possibility to accompany it with 'whatever it is' or something in such gist. He says: "a rigid use need not be referential: it may be attributive. Thus I may say: The actual *F*, whoever he is, is *G*" (Récanati 2012, p. 18). Well, I may say: Jean-Luc Mélenchon, whoever he is, is... well... is *G*. This would not make the name 'Jean-Luc Mélenchon' attributive. It just makes explicit my ignorance of who Jean-Luc Mélenchon is. I think there is a deeper issue here, namely a peculiar double-mindedness with respect to what counts as the actual world. The rigidifying of a description may come in two aspects: formal and ontological. Formally, rigidifying consists in choosing one element from the class of worlds, dubbing it w_0 or so, and relating the description to this element. We do not need to know anything about this w_0 , it might be a mere abstraction for us. We know nothing about whether this element in the class of worlds is *really* our world. It has no ontological criterion of identity; it is identified only as 'the world we've chosen for w_0 '. In fact, we can 'quantify over worlds playing the role of the actual world', with respect to which Martin Davies and Lloyd Humberstone introduced the operator 'Fixedly' (Davies 2006, p. 143). In cases where 'actual world' is a role that many actors can play, it makes sense to say: 'in an actual world, whichever it is,' and the statement has the air of a general thought, indeed. But there is another interpretation, an ontological one, of the 'actual' operator according to which 'actual world' is not a *role* but a metaphysical *reality*. In such cases there is nothing *descriptifying* in adding 'whichever it is', any more than there is in the phrase 'you, whoever you are'. There are some affinities between the distinction between the ontological and formal notion of actuality introduced here and the distinction between deep and superficial contingency discussed by Gareth Evans. Deep contingency is a metaphysical matter: 'whether a statement is deeply contingent depends upon what makes it true', whereas superficial contingency is a formal matter: "whether a statement is superficially contingent depends upon how it embeds inside the scope of modal operators" (Evans 2006, p. 179). Let us postpone closer elaboration of these affinities to another occasion, though. All we need here is to elicit some general intuition of this sort of distinction.

an appropriate structure of the file. Normally we expect that the mechanism would be activated by some epistemically rewarding relation with the object, such that we might take it as acquaintance, but this is not a condition *sine qua non*. Both syntactic module and perception alike, as triggering mechanisms, may produce some errors as to whether there is a relevant relation substantiating the opening of a singular file. Suppose, for instance, that I hear an utterance from behind the wall: ‘Be silent, Michael is sleeping’ and I open a file for this Michael. It is possible, that in fact there is a woman behind the wall, talking to me, and passing to me, through this act of communication, her causal connection to the said Michael (causal-historical singularity). But it might well be that there is a monkey behind the wall, tapping randomly on the keyboard of a speech-synthesiser and producing in this way the utterance. The monkey cannot pass to me any acquaintance with Michael because there is none. There is no Michael at all in that situation. Yet, cognitively, nothing is different for me (provided I do not know which is the case). I open a mental file for Michael anyway.

There are plenty of such possibilities for error: descriptions mistakenly taken as names,²¹ discourse anaphora mistakenly taken as a demonstrative,²² or hallucinations (fake visual triggering). And since there can be acquaintanceless singular files due to some errors, we can deliberately open such files if there is a need for them, as in the case of descriptive names. All we need is to have a regular descriptive file to start with. We can duplicate this file, change headings, and link the new one to the old one (Fig. 6).

Another matter that might be nicely accounted for in our model is the question of whether there can be any difference in cognitive significance between two mental files without any semantic difference between them. The problem was posed in Pagin (2013), who

²¹ [MrTumnus] “And you – you have come from the wild woods of the west?”
[Lucy] “I – I got in through the wardrobe in the spare room.”

[MrTumnus] “Daughter of Eve from the far land of Spare Room where eternal summer reigns around the bright city of War Drobe, how would it be if you came and had tea with me?”

C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*

²² “This man is the king” [as a part of “At the court there are many people. Sometimes you may meet a man wearing a crown. This man is the king. Bow to him”].

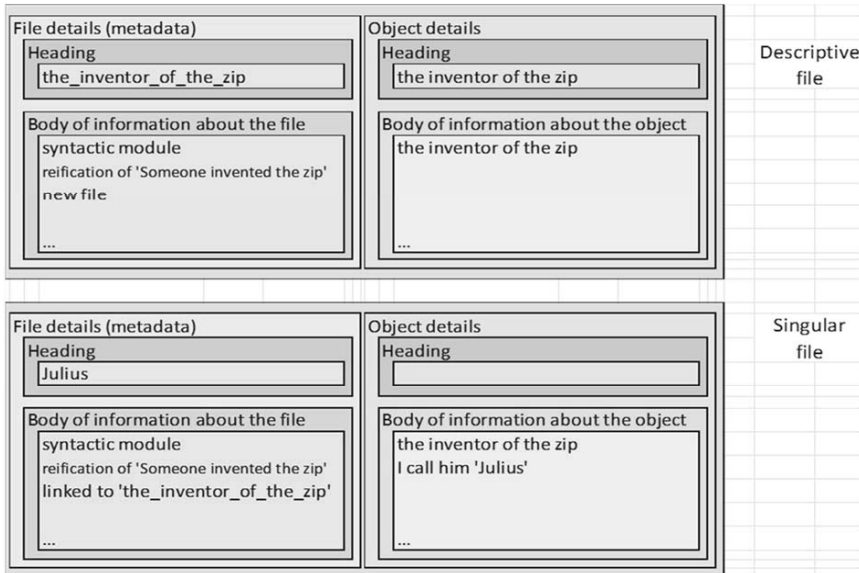


Fig. 6. Files for descriptive names.

maintained that mental file theorists would have problems accounting for such differences. He gave the following scenario as an example: “Suppose *X* takes herself to see two moths flying around in her kitchen. She opens a file for each, alpha and beta, thinking of them as ‘*A*’ and ‘*B*’ respectively [...]. In the case the subject in fact is mistaken, and there is only *one* moth causing the opening of both files, there does not seem to be any difference between acquaintance relations of alpha and beta” (Pagin 2013, p. 140). Récanati replied that: “two files can differ in cognitive significance *solo numero*” (Récanati 2013, p. 214). However, as Aidan Gray argued, maintaining that merely a numerical difference affects cognitive significance of the files is hardly a plausible option:

If names *a* and *b* are of the same generic type, they are both articulated with some signs. This means that a hearer who is competent with both names will need to disambiguate occurrences of *s* as being articulations of either *a* or *b*. A hearer who associates no different information with names *a* and *b* will have no reason to interpret an occurrence of *s* as an articulation of *a* rather than as an articulation of *b* [...]. [D]isambiguation requires differential information. (Gray 2016, p. 354)

The present account would resolve this dispute in the following way: two files can be identical in their objectual parts, which contain information about objects and contribute to the truth conditions of the thoughts based upon the files, yet they are different not solely numerically, but also in their metadata parts. For the channel of information of the file – contrary to what Pagin says (p. 137) – is not constituted merely by acquaintance relations (which are identical in the moth scenario) but rather by the triggering mechanism and opening circumstances of the file – and the latter are different in the moth scenario: the subject would not have opened two separate files for moth *A* and moth *B* if she had not seen a moth (at least) twice in two different circumstances.²³ Thus we can have two files based upon acquaintance with the same object, containing the same information about the object, and yet cognitively different due to differences in information about *the files themselves*.

There are many more issues that the present account may facilitate approaching, but we have to postpone their discussion to another occasion. Let us take stock now of what we have obtained so far.

First, we have followed the final part of the debate between singularism and descriptivism, witnessed a sort of ‘convergence’, as Récanati described it, and reached the point at which there is not much left for serious quarrel. Then we have examined the problem of acquaintanceless singular thought. This debate is quite convergent too, and at this present stage seems to be a promising candidate for a good compromise: a thought without acquaintance might be singular in the sense of vehicle *and* in the sense of primary content while lacking secondary, referential content. Since the notion of primary content regarding files, not expressions, is a bit metaphorical, there are still some doubts, as expressed by Pagin (2013, p. 142–144), about how exactly we shall understand this singular acquaintanceless primary content. Récanati’s statement that “primary content must be cashed out in terms of functions or roles” (2013, p. 231) would not resolve these doubts.

At this point I have proposed a sketch of a model of mental files designed to handle some of their important features. First, since there

²³ Thus Pagin is right that it is difficult to have distinct acquaintance relations without distinct relations (Pagin 2013, p. 141) but we do not need distinct relations to have distinct information channels.

can be acquaintanceless files and a conscious decision is not always available to initiate the opening of the files, we need some triggering mechanisms for opening files. I have distinguished between two kinds of discourse situations: acquaintance-situations (A-situations) and decoding-situations (D-situations) and posited a syntactic module as the triggering mechanism for opening the files. Then a bipartite structure of a file has been introduced, combining an objectual part (consisting in an objectual heading, encoding the truth-conditional import of the file, and an objectual body of information or misinformation about the referent of the file) and a metadata part (consisting of the main heading of the file and a body of meta information about the file itself, notably about the triggering mechanism responsible for opening the file and about the circumstances of opening the file, as well as linking/merging history, indexing etc.). This structure is capable of encoding a variety of types of mental files, which is then employed to illustrate how singularity/descriptivity of the files can be manipulated (as in the case of descriptive names) and how we can account for cognitively distinct files containing identical objectual information and grounded with the same acquaintance relations.

REFERENCES

- Azzouni, J. (2011). Singular Thoughts (Object-Directed Thoughts). *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary*, LXXXV, 45–61.
- Coliva, A., Belleri, D. (2013). Some Observations on Francois Récanati's Mental Files. *Disputatio*, V(36), 107–118.
- Crane, T. (2011). The Singularity of Singular Thought. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary*, LXXXV, 21–43.
- Davies, M. (2006). Reference, Contingency, and the Two-Dimensional Framework. In M. García-Carpintero and J. Maciá (Eds.), *Two-Dimensional Semantics* (pp. 141–175). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Donnellan, K. S. (1966). Reference and Definite Descriptions. In P. Ludlow (Ed.), *Readings in the Philosophy of Language* (pp. 361–381). Cambridge MA: The MIT Press 1997.
- Evans, G. (2006). Comment on 'Two Notions of Necessity'. In M. Garcia-Carpintero and J. Maciá (Eds.), *Two-Dimensional Semantics* (pp. 141–175). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Geach, P. T. (1967). Intentional Identity. *Journal of Philosophy*, 74, 627–632.
- Gray, A. (2016). Minimal Descriptivism. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 7, 343–364.

- Hansen, C., Rey, G. (2016). Files and Singular Thoughts Without Objects of Acquaintance: The Prospects of Récanati's (and Others') 'Actualism'. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 7, 421–436.
- Jaszczolt, K. (2010). Default Semantics. In B. Heine and H. Narrog (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Linguistic Analysis*, Oxford handbooks in linguistics. Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jeshion, R. (2004). Descriptive Descriptive Names. In M. Reimer and A. Bezuidenhout (Eds.), *Descriptions and Beyond*. Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, pp.591–612.
- Kanterian, E. (2009). Puzzles About Descriptive Names. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 32, 409–428.
- Murez, M., Récanati, F. (2016). Mental Files: an Introduction. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 7, 265–281.
- Pagin, P. (2013). The Cognitive Significance of Mental Files. *Disputatio*, 5(36), 133–145.
- Perner, J., Huemer, M., Leahy, B. (2015). Mental Files and Belief: A Cognitive Theory of how Children Represent Belief and Its Intensionality. *Cognition*, 145, 77–88.
- Perner, J., Leahy, B. (2016). Mental Files in Development: Dual Naming, False Belief, Identity and Intensionality. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 7, 491–508.
- Pryor, J. (2016). Mental Graphs. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 7, 309–341.
- Récanati, F. (2012). *Mental Files*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Récanati, F. (2013). Mental Files: Replies to my Critics. *Disputatio*, V(36), 207–242.
- Reimer, M. (2004). Descriptively Introduced Names. In M. Reimer and A. Bezuidenhout (Eds.), *Descriptions and Beyond* (pp. 613–629). Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press.
- Searle, J. R. (1983). *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Spelke, E. (1990). Principles of Object Perception. *Cognitive Science*, 14, 29–56.
- Strawson, P. F. (1950). On Referring. In P. Ludlow (Ed.), *Readings in the Philosophy of Language* (pp. 335–359). Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.
- Strawson, P. F. (1974). *Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar*. University paperbacks; 538. London: [New York]: Methuen; distributed by Harper & Row, Barnes & Noble Import Division.
- Tałasiewicz, M. (2010). Asymmetrical Semantics. In P. Stalmaszczyk (Ed.), *Philosophy of Language and Linguistics* (pp. 329–345). Frankfurt a. M.: OntosVerlag.
- Tałasiewicz, M. (2014). Categorical Grammar and the Foundations of the Philosophy of Language. In P. Stalmaszczyk (Ed.), *Philosophy of Language and Linguistics. The Legacy of Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein*, Philosophische Analyse/Philosophical Analysis. Berlin, New York: de Gruyter.