Donnellan: "Reference and Definite Descriptions"

TWO USES OF DESCRIPTIONS

Donnellan argues that neither Russell nor Strawson is right. Each is partly right, because each focuses on just one of two different uses of definite descriptions. And, in spite of their opposition, they share some false assumptions in common.

The two uses: **attributive** and **referential**.

Attributive

"A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so" (p. 267, left)

Referential

"A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an assertion … uses the description to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about and states something about that person or thing" (p. 267, left)

An **illustration** of the difference: "Smith's murderer is insane."

Attributive: the speaker says this without having any particular person in mind, basing his claim solely on the particularly brutal manner in which Smith has been murdered.

Referential: Jones has been charged with the murder and has been put on trial, where his behavior is distinctly odd. The speaker (having Jones in mind) utters the same sentence.

CRITICISM OF RUSSELL AND STRAWSON

Against Russell: Russell's theory applies at most to the attributive use of descriptions. He fails to account for the referential use. So Russell gets one of the two uses (the attributive), but misses the other.

Against Strawson: Strawson's theory accommodates the referential use, but "it goes too far in this direction" (p. 271, bottom left). For it fails to allow for the referential use to occur successfully even though nothing satisfies the description. So Strawson gets the referential use only partly right.

 Last modified 10/14/2008 5:43 PM

Their common error:

Both Russell and Strawson agree that **when nothing fits the description, truth-value is affected**. That is, if there is no φ, the truth-value of an utterance of a sentence of the form 'the φ is ψ' will be affected. For Russell, the sentence is **false**; for Strawson, it is **neither true nor false**.

Donnellan counters that Russell and Strawson are **both wrong** about the referential use. That is, a speaker may use 'the φ is ψ' to say something **true** even though **nothing** satisfies the description 'the φ' (i.e., there is no φ).

The key idea: one may succeed in referring to something by using a description that does not correctly describe the thing one is referring to.

Example: consider again the referential use of "Smith's murderer is insane" considered above. If it turns out that Jones is not guilty — indeed, that Smith was not actually murdered at all — then the description 'Smith's murderer' does not apply to anyone. Neither Jones nor anyone else fits the description. Nevertheless, Donnellan claims, the speaker has used the sentence to say something true: he has said of Jones, the man he referred to by means of the (inappropriate, as it turns out) description 'Smith's murderer', that he is insane. And if Jones is, indeed, insane, the speaker has said something true.

DENOTING VS. REFERRING

Donnellan uses Russell's definition of denoting: 'a definite description denotes an entity if that entity fits the description uniquely' (p. 271, left). But, like Strawson, he thinks of referring as a relation between a speaker that the thing he or she means to be talking about.

Hence, it easy to see why Donnellan holds these two notions to be distinct: *expressions* denote, *people* refer.

So, although a person cannot refer to something without being aware that she is referring to it, she can use an expression which denotes something without being aware that she is denoting it (cf. the Goldwater example on p. 271).

SEMANTIC OR PRAGMATIC DISTINCTION?

Donnellan does not make clear whether he thinks his attributive/referential distinction is semantic or pragmatic. That is, whether he is distinguishing two different meanings (truth-conditions) a sentence containing a description can have, or two different uses to which a single sentence — with a single meaning — can be put.

A comment on p. 272 right, though, suggests he thinks it is a pragmatic distinction:

> "It does not seem possible to say categorically of a definite description in a particular sentence that it is a referring expression (of course, one could say this if he meant that it *might* be used to refer). In general, whether or not a definite description is used referentially or attributively is a function of the speaker's intentions in a particular case. … Nor does it seem at all attractive to suppose an ambiguity in the meaning of the words; it does not appear to be semantically ambiguous. (Perhaps we could say that the sentence is pragmatically ambiguous ….)"

If we do take the basic distinction to be pragmatic, we leave open the possibility that a theory like Russell's might have the semantic facts about definite descriptions (i.e., the truth-conditions of sentences containing descriptions) right.

CAN RUSSELL'S THEORY HANDLE DONNELLAN'S DISTINCTION?

So we are left with this question: how can a single theory, like Russell's, accommodate the Donnellan distinction between referential and attributive uses of descriptions?

We get a clue from Jaakko Hintikka (*Noûs* 1, 1967, quoted by Kaplan, p. 344, left):

> "The only thing I miss in Donnellan's excellent paper is a clear realization that the distinction he is talking about is only operative in contexts governed by propositional attitudes or other modal terms."

The idea is this: the sentence "Smith's murderer is insane" is not ambiguous as it stands. But when we embed it in a larger context in which a propositional attitude is expressed, an ambiguity appears. For example, one might argue that Donnellan's referential-attributive ambiguity can be explicated in terms of a Russellian **scope** ambiguity in the sentence:

"Keith asserted that Smith's murderer is insane."

And it seems reasonable to approach Donnellan's distinction in this way, since he is interested in the *beliefs* held by, or the *assertions* made by, utterers of the sentence "Smith's murderer is insane."

A Syntactic (scope) ambiguity?

As a first stab, we might try this idea: to capture the **attributive** use (by Keith) of the description "Smith's murderer", we give the description **narrow** scope in the sentence "Keith asserted that Smith's murderer is insane." To capture the **referential** use, we give it **wide** scope.

If we can make this work, we will have explained Donnellan's referential vs. attributive ambiguity as a **syntactic** (scope) ambiguity.

> **Attributive**: Here we just embed the Russellian analysis **inside** the context 'Keith asserted that'. (In Russell's terms, we are treating the description 'Smith's murderer' as having a **secondary** occurrence.):

> > *Keith asserted that some insane person is the one and only person who murdered Smith.*

> > Keith asserted that $\exists x$ (! x murdered Smith $\wedge$ x is insane)

> ['! *Fx*' abbreviates '*Fx* $\wedge$ $\forall$ *y* (*Fy* $\rightarrow$ *y* = *x*)', i.e., '*x* is *F* and nothing but *x* is *F*']

> **Referential (1)**: Here we perform the Russellian analysis **outside** the propositional attitude operator 'Keith asserted that'. (In Russell's terms, we are treating the description 'Smith's murderer' as having a **primary** occurrence.):

> > *With respect to the person who murdered Smith, Keith asserted that he is insane.*

> > $\exists x$ (! x murdered Smith $\wedge$ Keith asserted that x is insane)

> > There is exactly one person who murdered Smith, and Keith asserted, of that person, that he is insane.

This is clearly unsatisfactory, since it has the speaker agreeing with Keith about who murdered Smith. The speaker may or may not believe that there is a unique murderer of Smith, but he does not commit himself to the claim that Jones is the murderer. Still, the speaker makes a definite reference—he refers to Jones. So we must secure this definite reference without representing the speaker as buying into Keith's way of referring to Jones—as the murderer of Smith.

Referential (2): We need to give the description wide scope, with the speaker making a definite reference to Jones, but the speaker should be understood as reporting that it is Keith, not the speaker, who takes Jones to be Smith's murderer. So here's a stab at doing that.

> "Keith asserted that (the person he takes to be) Smith's murderer is insane" or "Keith asserted, of the person that he referred to as Smith's murderer, that he is insane."

When we give the description in **this** sentence a **wide** scope reading, we get Donnellan's referential use. (In Russell's terms, we are treating the description 'the person Keith referred to as Smith's murderer' as having a **primary** occurrence.) But we are relying on more than just a scope distinction. So this is our Russellian way of capturing Donnellan's referential use of the definite description:

> *With respect to the person that Keith referred to as having murdered Smith, Keith asserted that he is insane.*
>
> $\exists x$ (! Keith referred to x as having murdered Smith $\wedge$ Keith asserted that x is insane)
>
> There is one and only one person that Keith referred to as having murdered Smith, and Keith asserted, of that person, that he is insane.

On Donnellan's analysis, Keith's assertion is true iff both (a) Keith is using 'Smith's murderer' to refer to exactly one person and (b) the person Keith is referring to is insane.

On our (Russellian) version of this, our **report** about Keith's assertion tells us that both (a) Keith referred to exactly one person as 'Smith's murderer' and (b) Keith asserted, about that person, that he is insane.

So our report about Keith's assertion tells us that what Keith asserted has precisely the truth-conditions of the referential use as described by Donnellan.

But notice that we needed **more than just a scope distinction to accomplish this**. We had to construe the description 'Smith's murderer' as elliptical for 'the person Keith referred to as Smith's murderer'. So Donnellan's distinction cannot plausibly be viewed as purely syntactic (even if we can make partial use of the scope distinction in explicating it). That leaves us with this question: is the remaining ambiguity semantic or pragmatic?

The question comes to this: how can we explain why someone reporting Keith's assertion might want to shift from 'Smith's murderer' to 'the person Keith takes to be Smith's murderer'? Here I think a plausible case can be made that the grounds are purely pragmatic.

Explanation:

Normally, when a speaker uses a description, 'the *F*', referentially, he can be taken to be referring to the object that **he believes** uniquely satisfies the description. So it should be correct to report his (referential) use of 'The *F* is *G*' as "He said that the thing he believes to be the *F* is *G*."

Yet, we seldom do report such assertions in this way. That is because, in most cases, the speaker's description can be assumed to be accurate — 'the *F*' and 'the thing he believes to be the *F*' are normally the same thing. Hence, to switch to the "skeptical" description would be misleading.

> **Example**: I say (pointing): "That's my wife — she's a very beautiful woman." Suppose you report: "He said that the woman he believes to be his wife is very beautiful." This is misleading — it suggests that I may perhaps be mistaken about whether I am married to this woman, or that I may not be very good at identifying my wife from a distance of 10 feet, etc.

So, it is always (or almost always) **true** to report someone's referential assertion of 'The *F* is *G*' as: "He said that the thing he believes to be the *F* is *G*." But to do so normally calls undo attention to the speaker's **belief** about what he's referring to (and thereby suggests that it may be false).

So we can report the occurrence of what Donnellan calls a referential use by giving a wide scope reading to the embedded description 'the object the speaker believes to be the *F*' and explaining the disappearance of the skeptical rider (i.e., the reporter says 'the *F*' rather than 'the object the speaker believes to be the *F*') on pragmatic grounds. Hence it appears as if Russell's theory can account for the referential-attributive distinction.

Much more can be said about this issue. The line crudely sketched here is consistent with Kripke's distinction between **semantic** reference and **speaker's** reference. The former is correctly accounted for by Russell's theory; the latter, which is a pragmatic notion, amounts to Donnellan's referential use. See also Stephen Neale's book, *Descriptions* (1990), esp. ch. 3.