

Phil/Ling 375: *Meaning and Mind*

[Handout #16]

Keith Donnellan: Reference and Definite Descriptions

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§ Review

What is the connection between proper names and definite descriptions?	
Frege	Proper names are disguised definite descriptions and an object becomes the referent of the name by satisfying the implied description.
Russell	(1) Proper names are like definite descriptions in that the existence of the referent is presupposed. But sometimes the presupposition can fail to be satisfied, and that's when the sentence is false (but meaningful). (2) If definite descriptions were capable of referring at all, they would refer to something only in so far as that thing satisfied the description.
Strawson	(1) The meanings of proper names and definite descriptions are determined by linguistic conventions; and their referents are determined in the particular contexts of use (by the speaker's intention). (2) When the referent does not exist, the use is spurious use and the utterance has no truth value.
Donnellan	(1) Definite descriptions have two uses and only in the attributive use does the satisfying relation determine the right referent. In the referential use, the speaker's intention determines the referent even when the referent does not satisfy the description. (2) What use is being used in each context is not determined by the truth of the speaker's beliefs, and not by the sentence itself either. It seems to be determined purely by what the speaker has in mind – the speaker's intention.

§ Donnellan's View on Other Theories

1. Russell's theory, as a theory of definite descriptions, apply, if at all, to the attributive use only.
2. Strawson's view (2) works not for definite descriptions used referentially, but for the attributive use.
3. Russell's theory was wrong because it ignores the referential use. Strawson's theory is wrong because it fails to make the distinction between the referential and the attributive use and mixes truths about each.

§ Two functions of definite descriptions: Referential vs. Attributive

* Strawson:

___ Referring: "What (Who, which one) are you talking about?"

___ Attributive: "What are you saying about it (him, her)?"

* Donnellan:

___ [referential use]: when definite descriptions are used to refer to what a speaker wishes to talk about.

___ **[attributive use]**: when definite descriptions are used to assert something about the subject being talked about.

1. The distinction is not determined by the sentence; it's determined by the *use*.
2. The same definite description occurring in one and the same sentence may, on different occasions of its use, function in either way.
3. We could not say of the sentence in isolation from some particular occasion on which it is used to state something.

§ On Russell and Strawson

1. Strawson and Russell seem to make a common assumption here about the question of how definite descriptions function: that we can ask how a definite description functions in some sentence independently of a particular occasion upon which it is used.
2. A second assumption shared by Russell's and Strawson's account of definite description is this. In many cases a person who uses a definite descriptions can be said to presuppose or imply that something fits the description.... Both Russell and Strawson assume that where the presupposition or implication is false, the truth value of what the speaker says is affected. For Russell the statement made is false; for Strawson it has no truth value.

Donnellan's view:

___ **It will turn out that one or the other of the two views may be correct about the non-referential use of definite descriptions, but neither fits the referential use.**

§ Donnellan's Theory: Referential Use vs. Attributive Use

[referential use]

___ 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.

___ The definite description is merely one tool for doing a certain job -- calling attention to a person or thing -- and in general any other device for doing the same job, another description or a name, would do as well.

[attributive use]

___ A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so.

___ The definite description might be said to occur essentially, for the speaker wishes to assert something about whatever or whoever fits that description.

(1) Example:

___ "Smith's murderer is insane."

[Attributive Use]

___ Suppose first that we come upon poor Smith foully murdered. From the brutal manner of the killing and the fact that Smith was the most lovable person in the world, we might exclaim: "Smith's murderer is insane."

[Referential Use]

___ Suppose that Jones has been charged with Smith's murder and has been placed on trial. Imagine that there is a discussion at his trial. We might sum up our impression of his behavior by saying, "Smith's murderer is insane." If someone asks to whom we are referring, by using this description, the answer here is "Jones."

(2) Example:

___ **"Smith's murderer is insane" when Smith committed suicide and the phrase does not fit anyone.**

Analysis:

___ In both situations, in using the definite description "Smith's murderer", the speaker in some sense presupposes or implies that there is a murderer. In both cases we have used the predicate "is insane", but in the [attributive use], if there is no murderer, there is no person of whom it could be correctly said that we attributed insanity to him. but in the [referential use], where the definite description is simply a means of identifying the person we want to talk about, it is quite possible for the correct identification to be made even though no one fits the description we used. We were speaking about Jones even though he is not in fact Smith's murderer and, in the circumstances imagined, it was his behavior we were commenting upon.

Generalizing from this case, we can say that there are two uses of sentences of the form, "the F is Y."

___ **In the [attributive use], if nothing is the F then nothing has been said to be Y.**

___ **In the [referential use], the fact that nothing is the F does not have this consequence.**

(3) Example:

___ **"Who is the man drinking a martini?"**

[Referential Use]:

___ Suppose one is at a party, seeing an interesting-looking person holding a martini glass, one asks this question.... If it should turn out that there is only water in the glass, one has nevertheless asked a question about a particular person, a question that it is possible for someone to answer.

[Attributive Use]:

___ Contrast this case with the use of the same question by the chairman of the local Teetotalers Union. He has just been informed that a man is drinking a martini at their annual party. He responds by asking his informant, "Who is the man drinking a martini?"

In asking the question the chairman does not have some particular person in mind about whom he asks the question; if no one is drinking a martini, if the information is wrong, no person can be singled out as the person about whom the question was asked.

In the referential use of a definite description we may succeed in picking out a person or thing to ask a question about even though he or it does not really fit the description; but in the attributive use if nothing fits the description, no straightforward answer to the question can be given.

(4) Example:

___ **"Bring me the book on the table."**

If "the book on the table" is being used referentially, it is possible to fulfill the order even though there is no book on the table. ... But imagine that we are told that someone has laid a book on our prize antique table, where nothing should be put. The order cannot now be obeyed unless there is a book that has been placed on the table.

In the [referential use] the definite description was a device for getting the other person to pick the right book; if he is able to pick the right book even though it does not satisfy the description, one still succeeds in his purpose. In the [attributive use], there is, antecedently, no "right book" except one which fits the description; the attribute of being the book on the table is essential.

(5) Example:

___ **"Is the man carrying a walking stick the professor of history?"**

- (a) There is a man carrying a walking stick.
- (b) The man over there is only carrying an umbrella.
- (c) It is not a man at all, but a rock that looks like one.

(Donnellan: I think I still have referred to something, to the thing over there that happens to be a rock but that I took to be a man. But in this case it is not clear that my question can be answered correctly.) => **problematic view**

(d) There is nothing at all; there is no rock, nor anything at all, to which I mean to refer, it was perhaps a trick of light that made me think there was a man there.

(Donnellan: perhaps here we have a genuine failure to refer at all, even though the description was used for the purpose of referring.)

(6) Linsky's example:

___ **"Her husband is kind to her" said of a spinster.**

[Attributive use]:

___ If the speaker has just met the lady, and noticing her cheerfulness and radiant good health, makes his remark from his conviction that these attributes are always the result of

having good husbands, he would be using the definite description attributively. Since she has no husband, there is no one to pick out as the person to whom he was referring.

[Referential use]:

___ i) If the use of "her husband" was simply a way of referring to a man to be the lady's husband, he would have referred to that man even though neither he nor anyone else fits the description.

___ ii) The man the speaker referred to may indeed be kind to the spinster the speaker may have said something true about that man.

§ Summary

1. When a definite description is used referentially, the speaker presupposes of some particular someone or something that he or it fits the description. No such presupposition is present in the attributive use of definite descriptions.
2. The particular presuppositions that we find present in referential uses are not ones we can assign to a definite description in some particular sentence in isolation from a context of use. The sentence by itself does not tell us any of this.
3. What is reference? When do we succeed in referring? What makes a reference successful?

A. When the definite description is used referentially:

___ It's successful as long as the audience sees to what one refers even though neither it nor anything else fits the description.

___ But it's also successful even when the audience fails to pick out the right referent.

___ Reference fails when the speaker would not admit that he is referring to the thing.

B. When the definite description is used attributively:

___ then the person or object becomes the referent of the description via a "fitting" or "matching" relation.

4. In the referential use as opposed to the attributive, there is a right thing to be picked out by the audience and its being the right thing is not simply a function of its fitting the description.