Class #9 - The Attributive/Referential Distinction

I. Two Uses of Definite Descriptions

Reference is a central topic in the philosophy of language because it is how language connects to reality.
The central question for theories of reference concerns how it is that language hooks onto the world.
The most obvious place for language to connect with the world is in the use of singular terms to denote or refer.
We have discussed three kinds of singular terms.

D1	demonstratives
D2	pronouns
D3	ordinary proper names
D4	definite descriptions

We can more-or-less easily provide paradigmatic instances of each of D1 - D3.

D1i	this, that, here
D2i	she, he, it
D3i	Joan Stewart, Ke$ha, William S. Burroughs
D4i	the king of France, the man in the corner, the first woman president of the U.S.

The problem of empty reference led to some concern among philosophers.
Frege distinguishes sense and reference to show that sentences containing empty singular terms (names or definite descriptions) could still be meaningful.
He also focuses on a logically perfect language in which the syntax would indicate the presence and role of denoting expressions.
Russell, arguing that logical form may not follow grammatical form, believes that D3s were merely disguised D4s.
The problem of empty reference is dissolved, for Russell, by ensuring a reference for all D1s and interpreting D2s, D3s, and D4s as non-denoting, existential expressions.
Strawson claims that uttered sentences containing empty singular terms fail to make assertions.

Donnellan, focusing on D4s, argues that both Strawson and Russell fail to disambiguate an attributive and a referential use.

> A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so. A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an assertion, on the other hand, 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 (285).

I can mean (at least) two different things by uttering BG.

| BG | The person who got the best grade in Logic is smart. |

In the attributive case, I am making a statement about any person who could get the best grade in logic, that that person must be smart to do so well.

We can call my intention *de dicto*.
In the attributive, *de dicto* sense, a speaker says something about whomever fits a given description.

In contrast, I can intend BG in a referential, *de re*, sense.
If Kimberly got the best grade in Logic (or, I think that she did, or I think that you think that she did) and I want to indicate that Kimberly is smart, I can use the description of Kimberly as the person who got the best grade to pick her out, and say of her that she is smart.
In the referential use, someone picks out an individual and then states something about her.

In one of Donnellan's cases we are asked to consider SM in a case in which there is no murder, but a suicide.

        SM   Smith's murderer is insane.

The truth-value of SM may differ depending on whether we interpret the definite description attributively or referentially.
Strawson, recall, argued that uttered sentences containing empty singular terms fail to make assertions.
In contrast, on the referential use, we can make a successful assertion even if there is no murderer.
We were just picking out a person (the person, say, accused of the murder) by using that description.
On the attributive use, though, nothing is said, for there is no person to fit that description.
Strawson thus accounts for only some uses of definite descriptions.

Notice that in the attributive case, the property of getting the best grade in Logic is part of the proposition expressed by BG.
It is essential in that case that the reference apply only to the person who got the best grade in the class.
In the referential case, the property of getting the best grade in the class has no part in the proposition.
Maybe someone other than Kimberly actually got the best grade.
I may be wrong about her getting the best grade, but I can still make an assertion about her being smart.

Donnellan claims that some philosophers assume that we can ask how a definite description functions independently of how the sentence is used on any particular occasion.

> Strawson and Russell seem to me 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. This assumption is not really rejected in Strawson's arguments against Russell. Although he can sum up his position by saying, "'Mentioning' or 'referring' is not something an expression does; it is something that someone can use an expression to do," he means by this to deny the radical view that a "genuine" referring expression has a referent, functions to refer, independent of the context of some use of the expression. The denial of this view, however, does not entail that definite descriptions cannot be identified as referring expressions in a sentence unless the sentence is being used. Just as we can speak of a function of a tool that is not at the moment performing its function, Strawson's view, I believe, allows us to speak of the referential function of a definite description in a sentence even when it is not being used. This, I hope to show, is a mistake (282-3).

Also, both Russell and Strawson assume that when referring, there is a presupposition that the referent exists.

> In many cases a person who uses a definite description can be said (in some sense) to presuppose or imply that something fits the description. If I state that the king is on his throne, I presuppose or imply that there is a king. (At any rate, this would be a natural thing to say for anyone who doubted that there is a king.) 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. Now if there are two uses of definite descriptions, it may be that the truth value is affected differently in each case by the falsity of the presupposition or implication (283).

If the referent does not exist, then the truth value of the sentence in which the reference is made is necessarily affected.
The two uses differ in the reasons for presupposing that someone fits a used definite description.
In the referential use, we want the hearer to pick out a particular person, so we don't want to mis-describe him or her.
If reference is successful, it does not matter if we mis-describe our referent.
In the attributive use, the description is primary; we do not want to refer to anyone unless someone fits the description.
If no one fits the description, then nothing will have been said.

In a case in which statements contain a referential use of a definite description, but the description does not fit the person to whom we wish to refer, we have said something true of a person, without having referred appropriately.
We agree with what was said, but not how it was said.
Strawson's automatic invocation of a truth-value gap for utterances which contain non-referring singular terms is thus too categorical.

> I am thus drawn to the conclusion that when a speaker uses a definite description referentially he may have stated something true or false even if nothing fits the description, and that there is not a clear sense in which he has made a statement which is neither true nor false (302).

For Donnellan, the attributive/referential distinction leads to a distinction between denoting and referring.
A definite description denotes if the entity fits the description uniquely.
Referring is picking out an individual in the referential use of a definite description.
Denoting is applicable to either use of definite descriptions.
Assimilating the two entails that a speaker could be referring to someone without knowing it, as in the case of the winner of a future presidential election.
History, I think, has not followed Donnellan in this use of 'refer' and I will not either.

III. Russell's Error

According to Russell's theory of descriptions, we must analyze BG in the attributive way, since the use of a definite description entails that there is one and only one thing that fits that description.
If we use a description that does not fit our intended subject, we have to re-cast our sentence.
For Russell, only sentences with logically proper names as their subjects can be used referentially, and only then because we are sure that reference will be successful.
Such sentences refer to the thing itself, not under a certain description.

Donnellan's argument is that definite descriptions can function more like proper names, directly picking out a specific individual, than Russell thought they were.

> Now this seems to give a sense in which we are concerned with the thing itself and not just the thing under a certain description, when we report the linguistic act of a speaker using a definite description referentially. That is, such a definite description comes closer to performing the function of Russell's proper names than certainly he supposed (303).

Russell claims that the proper analysis of DM is DMR1.

DM   The man in the corner drinking the martini is the provost.
DMR1 $(\exists x)\{Mx \bullet Cx \bullet Dx \bullet (\forall y)[(My \bullet Cy \bullet Dy) \supset y=x] \bullet Px\}$

Donnellan claims that DM does not entail DMR, as Russell alleges.
He denies Russell's claim because DMR2 may be false while DM still refers successfully, and attributes successfully.

DMR2 $(\exists x)(Mx \bullet Cx \bullet Dx)$

The relationship, then, between DM and DMR1 and DMR2 is weaker than entailment.

> Russell's theory does not show - what is true of the referential use - that the implication that something is the Φ comes from the more specific implication that what is being referred to is the Φ. Hence, as a theory of definite descriptions, Russell's view seems to apply, if at all, to the attributive use only. Russell's definition of denoting (a definite description denotes an entity if that entity fits the description uniquely) is clearly applicable to either use of definite descriptions. Thus whether or not a definite description is used referentially or attributively, it may have a denotation. Hence, denoting and referring, as I have explicated the latter notion, are distinct and Russell's view recognizes only the former (293).

III. Strawson's Error

Strawson sees that definite descriptions have two uses.
But he thinks that the use that a definite description has is determined by the sentence in which it is placed.
Recall that for Strawson, the meaning of a sentence is precisely the rules for its use.
Donnellan shows that the same sentence can be used in either way.

> "The murderer of Smith" may be used either way in the sentence "The murderer of Smith is insane." It does not appear plausible to account for this, either, as an ambiguity in the sentence. The grammatical structure of the sentence seems to me to be the same whether the description is used referentially or attributively: that is, it is not syntactically ambiguous. 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: the distinction between roles that the description plays is a function of the speaker's intentions) (297).

In particular, Donnellan argues against three of Strawson's claims.

> S1   Statements with a false existential presupposition are neither true nor false.
> S2   If no one fits the definite description, then the speaker has failed to refer.
> S3   The reason that a sentence may be neither true nor false is because of a failure to refer.

S1 may be true of the attributive use, but is clearly false of the referential use.
We may truly say something of the man in the corner drinking water, even if we call him the man in the corner drinking a martini.
Statements lack truth value only on the attributive use, not on the referential use.
On the referential use, it does not matter if a description fails correctly to describe a subject, as long as the individual is picked out.
That is, Strawson maintains the descriptivism that we see in Frege and Russell.

S2 is false too, for the same reason.
S3 does not explain why a sentence must be lack a truth value when nothing fits the description.
Actually, Donnellan thinks that S3 may be right for referential uses.
For example, if I am hallucinating, I may fail to refer, even when I am speaking de re.
Donnellan's point against Strawson, though, is that these are a much more obscure type of sentence than Strawson thought, and minimally important.

IV. The Attributive/Referential Distinction and Beliefs

Donnellan argues that the difference between the two uses is not whether the speaker believes that the description fits a particular person.

> It is possible for a definite description to be used attributively even though the speaker (and his audience) believes that a certain person or thing fits the description. And it is possible for a definite description to be used referentially where the speaker believes that nothing fits the description (290).

I can believe that a particular person fits the description, and describe either attributively or referentially.
Similarly, I can lack the belief that a particular person fits the description, and describe either attributively or referentially.

	Speaker believes that the attribute holds of a particular person	Speaker does not believe that the attribute holds of a particular person
Referential Use	In the courtroom, someone looks at the defendant acting crazy, and says SM of that person.	Someone who believes that the man on a throne is a usurper, yet refers to him as 'the king'.
Attributive Use	Someone who says SM while believing that anyone who would have murdered Smith must be insane, even though s/he believes the murderer to be a particular person.	Someone who says SM believing that anyone who murdered Smith must be insane, while not believing that any particular person is the murderer.

One could use the case of Smith's murderer to set up a referential use of 'Smith's murderer', even though the speaker does not believe that the attribute holds of a particular person.
For example, if one believes that someone insane has been falsely convicted of the murder, one could say SM, *de re*, of that person, while not believing that person to have murdered Smith.

A speaker's intentions determine whether a definite description is used referentially or attributively.
I can know, in any case, whether I intend to refer to a particular person, or whether I just intend to attribute something to anyone who fits my definite description.

V. The Importance of the Distinction

Donnellan thinks the attributive/referential distinction is a blow for the logical analysis of language.
He believes that it shows that any analysis of what is said depends not merely on the sentences used, and their meanings.
Instead, it depends essentially and irreducibly on a speaker's intentions.
Intentions are not the kinds of things available for logical analysis in any obvious way.

One way to save logical analysis is to insist, as Frege did, that the appropriate media for truth values are propositions.
Propositions can be as fine-grained as we want.
The same sentence may express a wide range of propositions.
So, SM can express either proposition SM1 or SM2.

> SM1   that anyone who murdered Smith is insane
> SM2   that the person in the jury box is insane

Each of these propositions is available for logical, or semantic, analysis.
The question of which proposition was expressed is a matter of pragmatics.
The problem vanishes, for the ambiguity is merely one of natural language.
The fine-grained propositions lack the ambiguity.

In their defense, Russell and Strawson may also claim that the *de re* use reduces to the *de dicto* use.
Russell may make an *ad hoc* adjustment to deal with the problem.
But Donnellan has at least pointed to a weakness in Russell's theory, in which the ambiguity was unnoticed

More importantly, Donnellan's observations about the referring use of definite descriptions have consequences for other singular terms.
Remember, our interest in singular terms is due to their connection to the world.
Frege argues that proper names refer to objects mediately, through the sense of the name, a conjunctive list of properties which each speaker associates with the name.
Similarly, Russell analyzes ordinary proper names into existential assertions including a description of an object.
Here's Strawson on names:

> It is no good using a name for a particular unless one knows who or what is referred to by the use of the name. A name is worthless without a backing of descriptions which can be produced on

demand to explain that application (Strawson, *Individuals* 20).

If Donnellan is correct that the gulf between proper names and descriptions is narrow, then the attributive/referential distinction may rebound on our analysis of the semantic value of names. Indeed, that's the claim made at first, tentatively, by Donnellan, and then, forcefully, by Saul Kripke, who rejects the Frege/Russell/Strawson analysis of names and in so doing ushers in a second wave of the language revolution.