

Donnellan: The Attributive/Referential Distinction

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Overview - Reference

- how does language connects to reality?
- definite descriptions
- response to Descriptivism
 - Frege: mode of presentation/sense
 - Russell: abbreviation of descriptive
 - Strawson: presuppositionalism
- Russell and Strawson fail to distinguish attributive and referential use

“The description is here merely a device for getting one’s audience to pick out or think of the thing to be spoken about, a device which may serve its function even if the description is incorrect.”

Attributive and Referential Distinction

- Attributive use:

general claim about anyone who fits the description

- Referential use:

an individual is picked out, then something is said about the individual

Example

Smith's murderer is insane

- suppose there is no murderer
- Attributive use: general statement about anyone who could fit the description
- Referential use: about a specific individual, then states something about this individual

Definite Description Functions

- Strawson and Russell think definite descriptions can act independent of sentence used
 - Strawson and Russell presupposition that a referent exists
 - if it does not exist, then affects truth value
 - Russell: false
 - Strawson: no truth value
- referential use of the definite description, then something true or false even if nothing fits the description
- refer to future people i.e. “The President of the United States in 2016 is powerful.”

Definite Descriptions function like Proper Names

- picking out specific individual

example:

The man in the corner drinking the martini is the provost

Speaker's Intention: Belief

- lack belief of description but still describe in referential or attributive use
 - Smith's murderer is insane.
 - attributive: believing whoever murdered Smith must be insane, but not believing that anyone, even Jones, is the murderer
 - referential: believes Jones is innocent but still refers to him as Smith's Murderer
- speaker may say something true even if description is false

Importance of the Distinction

- any analysis of language depends on : sentence used , meanings, and speaker's intention
- shows not much difference between proper names and definite descriptions
 - then focus on semantic analysis (rather than logical)

Groups

Goal: evaluate how the example demonstrates that the description does not need to refer to the item being referred. Do you agree? Compare with Frege, Russell, and Strawson.

- bottom p. 287 - p. 288: “Bring me the book on the table.”
- p.299 - mid 300: “The lady’s husband is kind”