

Class 8 - The Attributive/Referential Distinction

I. Two uses of definite descriptions

Reference is a central topic in the philosophy of language because of its connection to reality. It is how language hooks on to the world.

We have examined a variety of denoting, or referring, expressions:

logically proper names
ordinary proper names
definite descriptions

Frege, Russell, and Strawson argued about names, especially.

Donnellan helps to clarify the questions at issue by distinguishing an attributive and a referential use of the definite description.

He argues that both Strawson and Russell fail to disambiguate these two uses.

Consider:

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

I can mean (at least) two different things by uttering 1.

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 1 in a referential, *de re*, sense.

For example, 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.

Consider Donnellan's example:

2. Smith's murderer is insane.

In this case, there could really be no murder, but a suicide.

The truth-value of 2 differs, depending on how we interpret the definite description.

On the referential use, it does not matter that there is no murderer, because we were just picking out a person (the person, say, accused of the murder) by using that description.

On the attributive use, nothing is said, for there is no person to fit that description.

Notice that in the attributive case, the property of getting the best grade in Logic is part of the proposition expressed by 1.

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 both Russell and Strawson assume that we can ask how a definite description functions independently of how the sentence is used on any particular occasion.

This is more Russell's mistake, though.

Donnellan points out that Strawson doesn't eliminate this assumption, but it is consistent with his position, and only charitable to think that he thinks this.

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

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.

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 (275).

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.

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, p 271.

II. Russell's error

According to Russell's theory of descriptions, we must analyze 1 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.

Consider:

3. The man in the corner drinking the martini is the provost.

It does not entail, as Russell argues:

4. $(\exists x)\{Mx \cdot Cx \cdot Dx \cdot (y)[(My \cdot Cy \cdot Dy) \supset y=x] \cdot Px\}$

because

5. $(\exists x)(Mx \cdot Cx \cdot Dx)$

may be false while 3 still refers successfully, and attributes successfully.
The relationship, then, between 3, and 4 and 5, is weaker than entailment.

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.

Strawson believes that if a presupposition that an object exists fails, then the statement is neither true nor false.

But 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.

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

6. Statements with a false existential presupposition are neither true nor false.

7. If no one fits the definite description, then the speaker has failed to refer.

8. The reason that a sentence may be neither true nor false is because of a failure to refer.

6 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.

7 is false too, for the same reason.

8 does not explain why a sentence must lack a truth value when nothing fits the description.

Actually, Donnellan thinks that 8 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.

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 2 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 2 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 2 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 2, 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, the sentence 2 can express either proposition:

9. That anyone who murdered Smith is insane.

10. 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 un-noticed