

Donnellan

The Referential/Attributive Distinction

Philosophy 408: *The Language Revolution*
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Reference: where language meets reality

- We have examined a variety of denoting, or referring, expressions:
 - ▶ logically proper names
 - ▶ ordinary proper names
 - ▶ definite descriptions
- Donnellan helps to clarify the questions at issue by distinguishing an attributive and a referential use of the definite description.

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

- Can be used attributively, or de dicto
 - ▶ In the attributive, de dicto sense, a speaker says something about whomever fits the given description.
 - ▶ There is no presumption that a particular person fits the description
- Can be used in a referential, de re, sense.
 - ▶ The referential use picks out an individual and then states something about her.
 - ▶ 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.

‘Smith’s murderer is insane.’

There could really be no murder, but a suicide.

- The truth-value 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.

Russell and Strawson

- They 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.
- They assume that when referring, there is (at least) 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.

Why should we suppose 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).

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.

‘The man in the corner drinking the martini is the provost.’

- It does not entail, as Russell argues:
 - ▶ $(\exists x)\{Mx \cdot Cx \cdot Dx \cdot (y)[(My \cdot Cy \cdot Dy) \supset y=x] \cdot Px\}$
- Because:
 - ▶ $(\exists x)(Mx \cdot Cx \cdot Dx)$
 - ▶ may be false while the sentence still refers successfully, and attributes successfully.
- The relationship, then, among the original sentence and the two regimentations is weaker than entailment.

Strawson

- Strawson 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.

Donnellan against Strawson

- Statements with a false existential presupposition are neither true nor false.
 - ▶ 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.
- If no one fits the definite description, then the speaker has failed to refer.
 - ▶ Again, the man with the martini
- The reason that a sentence may be neither true nor false is because of a failure to refer.
 - ▶ That does not explain why a sentence must lack a truth value when nothing fits the description.
 - ▶ Though, if I am hallucinating, I may fail to refer, even when I am speaking de re.
 - ▶ This type of sentence is much rarer than Strawson thought.

The attributive/referential distinction and beliefs

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

Four Cases

	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.

What determines whether a definite description is used referentially or attributively?

A blow for the logical analysis of language?

- What is said depends not merely on the sentences used, and their meanings.
- 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.

Saving analysis

- 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 same sentence can express either proposition:
 - That anyone who murdered Smith is insane.
 - 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.

Metaphysics, Epistemology, Semantics