Donnellan on the referential/atributive distinction and Russell's theory of descriptions

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1 Russell's 'two assumptions'

Donnellan thinks that both Russell and Strawson make two false assumptions, and that by rejecting these assumptions we can solve a number of problems with both theories which emerge in the course of the paper.

The first assumption is that

> "We can ask how a definite description functions in a sentence independently of a particular occasion on which it is used." (42)

Donnellan thinks that there is a very basic problem with the way that Russell and Strawson attempt to give an account of the meanings of descriptions; both of them – and we've seen this with Russell - attempt to show how descriptions contribute to the meanings of sentences. But he does not focus on how descriptions contribute to the meanings of sentences on particular occasions of the use of those sentences.

The second assumption Donnellan wants to call into question is that

> "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. . . . Both Russell and Strawson assume that where the presupposition or implication is false, the truth value of what the speaker said is affected." (42)

That is, both Russell and Strawson assume that whenever a speaker utters a sentence of the form 'The F is G', what they say is not true if there is no thing which is F.

As we'll see, these two assumptions are related in Donnellan's mind. For, he thinks, if Russell and Strawson had paid more attention to the interpretation of sentences containing definite descriptions *on particular occasions of use,* they would have seen that there are two distinct uses of definite descriptions, and that on one of these uses, there is no such requirement for the truth of the sentence that anything satisfy the description 'the F.'

2 Donnellan's distinction between attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions

So Donnellan thinks that if we focus on how definite descriptions are used, we'll see that they are used in two quite different ways. At the beginning of §III of the article, he introduces some terminology for these two different uses of descriptions:

> "I will call the two uses of descriptions I have in mind the attributive use and the referential use. A speaker who uses a description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so. A speaker who uses a 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. In the first case the description might be said to occur essentially, for the speaker wishes to assert something about whatever or whoever fits that description; but in the referential use 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 thing ...would do as well." (46)

Note that Donnellan does not have in mind here a distinction between two different kinds of descriptions - like a distinction between complex and simple descriptions, for example. Rather, this is a distinction between two different uses of definite descriptions: two different ways that one and the same description could be used.

To illustrate the difference, consider cases of ambiguity that we've discussed before. Here is one way to think of them. There is one word, 'bank' in English. But it has two different uses: it may be used either to pick out financial institutions, or to pick out the sides of rivers. There is one word, and two ways of using it.

Donnellan may not be claiming that definite descriptions are ambiguous in just the way that 'bank' is; but he is saying that there are two different ways of using definite descriptions, just as there are two different ways of using 'bank.'

To show that he is talking about two different ways of using a single expression rather than two different classes of expressions, he illustrates his distinction first by considering two different uses of a single sentence: "Smith's murderer is insane." Consider the following two uses:

Attributive use. We come across Smith, foully murdered. From the manner of killing and Smith's good character, we might claim "The murderer of Smith is insane." This might be paraphrased as the claim that whoever killed Smith must have been insane. (p. 46)

Referential use. We are at the trial of Jones, who has been accused of murdering Smith. One the basis of his behavior, we might claim "The murderer of Smith is insane." In this case it is the speaker's intention not to use the description to refer to whoever satisfies some condition, but to pick out that one individual: Jones. (p. 46-7)

How are these uses supposed to be different? Donnellan isolates a number of points of difference; here I want to focus on two. (Remember the initial way he explained the difference - in attributive uses the description occurs essentially, as these are cases in which we want to speak about whatever satisfies the description, whereas in referential uses the description is just one tool among others we could have used to single out the referent of the definite description. The further differences he notes follows from this basic distinction.)

Difference 1. In attributive uses of 'The F is G', if nothing is F, then nothing has been said to be G: nothing is referred to. But in referential uses of 'The F is G', something will still have been said to be G, even if that thing is not F.

Difference 2. In both uses of 'The F is G', it is in some sense presupposed or implied that something is F. But in referential uses, it is implied that some particular object o is F, whereas in attributive uses it is implied that something or other is F without this being implied of any particular object.

So we have the following differences between the two uses of definite descriptions:

Attributive use of 'The F is G'	Referential use of 'The F is G'
The speaker's intention is to say something about whatever is the F	The speaker's intention is to pick out some particular individual (whether or not they are the F) and say something about that individual
If nothing is F, then the speaker does not refer to anything, and so does not say that anything is G	If nothing is F, the speaker still refers to something, and says that it is G
It is presupposed or implied that something or other is F	It is presupposed or implied that some particular object is F

Donnellan further supports his case that these are two very different uses by showing that the distinction shows up in speech acts other than assertions. He asks us to consider a party, when someone sees someone across the room drinking a clear liquid out of a martini glass and asks, 'Who is the interesting person drinking the martinin?' This use is referential; even if the person were drinking water out of a martini glass, the speaker would still have asked something about that person, and the speaker's utterance does presuppose or imply that that person in particular is drinking a martini.

Donnellan then asks us to consider a meeting of Teetotalers, in which someone has informed the president that one of the members is drinking a martini. If the president then asks, 'Who is the person drinking the martini?', his use is attributive. If no one is drinking a martini, the speaker does not succeed in asking a question about anyone, and does not presuppose that

anyone in particular is drinking a martini.

He makes the same point about commands. The sentence 'Bring me the book on the table' may be used attributively, as when the speaker and audience both have a particular book in mind. But if the topic is whether a book has been placed on a delicate antique table, the command 'Bring me the book on the table' has the marks of an attributive usage.

3 What makes a use attributive or referential?

At this stage, Donnellan has made a good case that he is on to a distinction with fairly wide application. Two basic questions remain: (i) What makes a use of a definite description referential or attributive? and (ii) How does this distinction bear on Russell's theory of descriptions?

We already know that the referential/attributive distinction cannot be explained in terms of a distinction between two different kinds of descriptions: after all, as Donnellan has argued, one and the same description may be used referentially in one context and attributively in another.

A natural suggestion is that what makes the difference is whether the speaker has any beliefs about whether a particular individual satisfies the description. This seems to fit the Smith's murderer cases; in the attributive use, the speaker does not have any beliefs that a particular individual is the murderer of Smith, whereas in the attributive use (in the courtroom) he does. But, as Donnellan points out (in §IV), this is not quite right. The person standing by Smith's body could have had beliefs about who the murderer was, and still used the description attributively; and someone might even believe that someone other than Jones murdered Smith, while still using the description referentially to pick Jones out.

Rather, it seems clear that, as Donnellan suggests, it is the *intentions* of a speaker which make the difference between referential and attributive uses of a definite description. After all, the intuitive way to explain the distinction in the first place is that referential uses are characterized by speakers intending to use the description to single out a particular individual about whom they wish to say something. As Donnellan puts the matter,

> "In general, whether or not a definite description is used referentially or attributively is a function of the speaker's intentions in a particular case." (58)

4 Donnellan on Russell's view of denoting

4.1 Donnellan's claim that Russell's theory is incomplete

It is clear that Donnellan thinks that this distinction we have been discussing poses some problems for Russell's theory of descriptions. He says,

"I conclude, then, that neither Russell's nor Strawson's theory represents a correct account of the use of definite descriptions - Russell's because it ignores altogether the referential use . . . " (58)

Why does he say this? As we've seen, Russell's theory requires that, in order to any utterance of a sentence of the form *The F is G* to be true, it must be the case that there is some object *o* which is the unique *F*. But Strawson has been at pains to show that, when we use definite descriptions referentially, this is simply not so. When, for example, we say "The man over there drinking a martini is interesting," if we are using the description referentially (if, e.g., we are intending to use the description to pick out some man at whom we are looking), it seems that we can refer to the man in the corner, and say something true of him, even if he is not drinking a martini, and so *even if there is nothing which uniquely satisfies the description.* So it seems that, if you share Donnellan's intuitions about this case - and it is hard not to agree that we can succeed in saying something true about someone even if we make a mistake about what they are drinking - Russell's theory fails to account for this kind of case.

Donnellan suggests that, for all he's said, Russell's theory is an adequate account of attributive uses of definite descriptions. So maybe when we say "The murder of Smith is insane" while standing by Smith's corpse, what we say is true just in case there is one and only one murderer of Smith, and that person is insane. But that doesn't change the fact that Russell's theory fails to give an account of one important feature of our use of definite descriptions, their referential use.

4.2   Donnellan on Russell's general picture of referring expressions

Donnellan closes his article, in §IX, with some more general reflections about Russell's view of meaning and reference.

Recall that Frege held that all referring expressions, whether definite descriptions or singular terms, have both a sense and a reference. We saw that Frege held a number of views about all referring expressions: (i) they can have a sense, even if they lack a reference; and (ii) their sense determines their reference.

Russell broke with this picture in one important sense, insofar as he saw a difference between proper names, on the one hand, and descriptions, on the other. Unlike Frege, Russell held that definite descriptions were quantifier phrases; but, like Frege, he held that they have a sense distinct from their reference, and that (i) they can have a sense even if they lack a reference, and that (ii) their sense determines their reference (the reference of a definite description is whatever the unique thing is which has the properties specified by the description).

But, again unlike Frege, he held that there were a class of referring expressions about which these Fregean theses did not hold. At the time of 'On Denoting,' Russell called such referring expressions proper names - thus he contrasted, for example, 'Scott' with the description 'the author of Waverly.' Later powerful considerations pushed him away from this view of ordinary proper names, but he still held that what he called *logically proper names*, and what Donnellan calls *genuine proper names*, are referring expressions of a quite different sort.

About such expressions Russell held that they have no sense distinct from their reference, and hence that their lacking a reference would also entail their lacking a meaning. You might say that Russell thought of these logically proper names as genuinely *referential* referring expressions.

Donnellan, as we have seen, disagrees with Russell's theory of descriptions; but he makes clear in this last passage that he thinks that Russell's overall picture of referring expressions is, in an important way, correct. In particular, he endorses Russell's anti-Fregean distinction between two different classes of referring expressions: those that pick out an object in the world directly, and those that do so via the mediation of a more general Fregean sense.

For Donnellan, Russell's main mistake was one of detail. He was right to think that there is a distinction between directly referring and indirectly referring expressions, but wrong to think that all definite descriptions fall into the category of indirectly referring expressions, which pick out some object only insofar as that object satisfies some general condition attached to the word. (This general condition will be the word or phrase's meaning, or sense.) So in recognizing a class of uses of definite descriptions which fall into the directly referring camp, Donnellan is, in a way, claiming that Russell was more right than even he knew.