

Donnellan's Distinction: Pragmatic or Semantic Importance?

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In "Reference and Definite Descriptions," Keith Donnellan makes a distinction between attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions. Donnellan argues that Russell's theory of definite descriptions does not accommodate this distinction. Saul Kripke, in "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference," argues that although Donnellan's distinctions may have some pragmatic import, they do not refute Russell's theory. Donnellan challenges Russell's truth values for denoting sentences, claiming that they cannot correctly deal with his referential use. He proposes, against Kripke's claim, that there is some semantic relevance to his distinction. Is Donnellan's distinction relevant to semantics and truth conditions or not? In this paper I will begin by summarizing Donnellan's distinctions and then will show how they make Russell's theory inadequate. I will then discuss Kripke and Donnellan's arguments and distinctions, concluding with the questions of whether or not belief affects Donnellan's distinctions and whether or not his distinctions are solely pragmatic.

Donnellan distinguishes between attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions. The former occurs when the speaker predicates a property of whatever is referred to and the latter occurs when the speaker gives his audience the ability to discern whom or what he is talking about. Donnellan uses the example "Smith's murderer is insane." Suppose we find Smith's body eviscerated in a brutal fashion, and I comment,

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“Smith’s murderer is insane.” This use is attributive; I predicate insanity of Smith’s murderer, whoever it is. Suppose that at the murder trial, the defendant Patrick is spinning in circles and babbling to himself. I comment, “Smith’s murderer is insane.” When asked whom I’m speaking of, the answer is Patrick. So, using Donnellan’s distinction, this use is referential. Assume no one murdered Smith. If the definite description is used attributively, then no one is falsely said to be insane because we attempted to attribute something to someone who does not exist. Conversely, if the definite description is used referentially, then Patrick is still said to be insane because we are referring to Patrick with the definite description “Smith’s murderer.” An attributive use occurs whenever we presuppose that something fits the definite description. Attributively we suppose that something or other (even if it is unknown) fits the definite description, and referentially we suppose that a particular fits it.

Thus, when we speak attributively the description is essential. If we want to predicate something of “Smith’s murderer,” it is necessary that we use the description—otherwise, meaning is lost. But referentially, any description would have worked, since we are referring to a certain object or person. For example, if speaking referentially, we could have just as easily have said, “Patrick is insane” or “That man who is spinning is insane.” So a question arises: is the difference between the referential and attributive use just a difference in the belief of the speaker? Donnellan answers no. He states, “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 nothing fits the description” (Donnellan, “Reference and Definite Description” 251).¹ Suppose my mother is married to a man who I am told is my father, but I believe he is not. If my mother is on the phone with him, I may say, “May I speak with my father?” I succeed in referring to him without me or my mother being forced to believe he is my father. I use the definite description “my father” referentially without any corresponding belief. So the question is whether or not Donnellan’s distinction is semantically relevant or merely pragmatic.

¹ This work will be referred to by the author’s last name followed by the page number.

Donnellan challenges Russell's view of the truth values of referential uses. He proposes that there is some semantic relevance to his distinction. According to Donnellan, even in speech, if nothing fits the description (for example, if Smith committed suicide), then "it is [still] possible to say something true or to ask a question that gets answered or to issue a command that gets obeyed" (Donnellan 252). The problem Donnellan has with Russell's theory can be best understood by example. As in the earlier example, even if Smith committed suicide, when I am in the courtroom and refer to Patrick by saying "Smith's murderer is insane," what I said is true if Patrick is in fact insane since I am using the definite description referentially. The problem for Russell, then, is how his theory analyzes the referential use of this statement. Russell's theory, when applied to the referential use in which x serves as the description, entails that "there exists one and only one x ." Donnellan states that "The implication that something is the [x] . . . does not amount to an entailment" (Donnellan 253). So even though when we use the phrase "Smith's murderer is insane" referentially we may imply that there is a murderer, it does not entail or specifically state that there is such a thing. According to Russell's theory, if Smith committed suicide, the phrase is false, since there is no unique x . But it seems clear that when we use the phrase we successfully refer to Patrick, and that, if he is insane, the statement is true.

"One might think that if Donnellan is right, Russell must be wrong, since Donnellan's truth conditions for statements containing referential definite descriptions differ from Russell's" (Kripke, "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference" 253).² According to Kripke, though, there is no argument against Russell here. Donnellan could be right about his distinction, but only in a pragmatic sense, and Russell could likewise be correct about a statement's semantics or truth values. Kripke considers the example "Her husband is kind to her," used when the woman has no husband, only a lover. Kripke asserts that in this case, Donnellan would say we referred to the lover, and said of him that he is kind to her. Kripke questions whether Donnellan would say that this statement is true or false; he says of this that "Donnellan would hedge" ("Speaker's Reference and

² This paper will be referred to by its title followed by the number of the page on which the citation occurs. Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* will be referred to by its title followed by the page number as well.

Semantic Reference” 253). Kripke points out that if Donnellan were to say the statement would be true if the lover is kind to her, then there would be a point of contention between him and Russell, since Russell would assert that the statement is false. But according to Kripke, Donnellan is unclear on this. Kripke states that in this case, when reporting the statement, we must use the definite description “her husband” either attributively or referentially. If it is attributively then “we misrepresent the linguistic performance of the speaker” (“Speaker’s Reference and Semantic Reference” 253). Basically we would be saying something like her husband, whoever he is, is nice to her, when the fact is that the man is speaking of the lover and not her husband, whether or not she has one. So we turn to the referential use. If speaking referentially, we are referring to the man there, but generally we refer to someone as “her husband” or “his wife” only if it is assumed they are actually married. Kripke claims that “Donnellan does not clearly assert that the statement . . . ever has non-Russellian truth conditions” (“Speaker’s Reference and Semantic Reference” 254). But Donnellan states that if we do use the definite description “her husband” referentially then “we are ourselves referring to someone and reporting the speaker to have said something of that person, in which case we are back to the possibility the he did say something true or false of that person” (Donnellan 257). Donnellan concludes that when using a definite description, we may be saying something true or false, but he gives no clear indication that there are cases in which an uttered statement may be neither true nor false.

So who is right in this case, Kripke or Donnellan? Is there is a semantic distinction to be made when dealing with definite descriptions, or is Donnellan’s distinction solely a pragmatic one? In *Naming and Necessity*, Kripke states that “[Donnellan’s] remarks about reference have little to do with semantics or truth conditions, though they may be relevant to a theory of speech-acts” (*Naming and Necessity* 25). Donnellan on the other hand holds that when we use a definite description referentially, even if nothing fits the description, we “may have stated something true or false” (“Speaker’s Reference and Semantic Reference” 257). It seems that much of the apparent controversy may have to do with the belief of the speaker. So we are back to the question Donnellan asked of his own theory previously, whether the differences between the referential and attributive use just

come down to a difference in the belief of the speaker. If it is simply a matter of belief, then Donnellan's distinction has little to do with semantics. If not, then Donnellan's distinction is at odds with Russell and is of more important consideration in theories of definite descriptions.

Donnellan admits that when we say something attributively using the form "The x is F ," where there is no x , we can't report whether or not the speaker said of this or that person that he or she is F . But if we say something referentially then we can attribute something to x . Take the example of "Her husband is kind to her." Assume that the man the speaker was referring to is Jones. In this case, we may correctly report that "Jones is kind to her" or "The x is F ," where x is "Jones" and F is "being kind to her." Donnellan continues and asks us to suppose that Jones is the president of a university. We may then say, "The president of the university was kind to her" and do so correctly. If we then confront Jones himself and say, "He said that you were kind to her," we may do so without mentioning at all that he was originally referred to as her husband. The statement still has a truth value, and no belief of Jones being her husband is implied.³ In fact, we need not even use a description the original speaker would agree with (for example if he did not know the man's name was Jones), but just a description which fits. Kripke thinks that Donnellan concludes, "Thus where the definite description is used referentially, but does not fit what was referred to, we can report what a speaker said and agree with him by using a description or name which does fit" ("Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference" 256).

Kripke advocates a different view for referents of names and descriptions, which he calls the "semantic referent." For names, this semantic referent is what is named; for descriptions, it is what uniquely satisfies the description. In this way Kripke states that a speaker may refer to something other than his semantic referent if he has appropriate false beliefs (*Naming and Necessity* 25). This is what Kripke really thinks is happening in some of Donnellan's examples. If we consider the example "The man over there playing poker is sad tonight," then according to Donnellan we can refer to him referentially even if he is not playing poker, but according to Kripke, we may only refer to him (assuming he is not playing poker) if we have appropriate false beliefs. Otherwise, we must be referring to the

³ Even if there is implication, there is no entailment (see above).

semantic referent, a man that is really playing poker and is sad. So the man the speaker refers to may not be playing poker and is still sad, but there could be another man at the party who is playing poker and is not sad. Thus we may say that the statement is false, but we know that no one is referring to the second man who is playing poker and not sad, even though the definite description may semantically refer to him.

To summarize, Kripke seems to think that Donnellan's distinction has pragmatic rather than semantic import; it does not refute Russell's theory, but only gives a description of how definite descriptions are used in language. Donnellan, on the other hand, seems to have shown that his distinctions are semantically important, that they affect truth values, and that the interpretation of such statements is necessarily different than Russell's in a way for which Russell's theory cannot account.

It seems that even if we do believe that there is something else which fills our definite description we may still refer to some object other than that which semantically (in Kripke's sense) fills our definite description. So in Donnellan's sense, if the man referred to really is sad "we have a substantial intuition that the speaker said something true of the man to whom he referred in spite of his misimpression" ("Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference" 249). It seems to me that Donnellan's distinction cannot be simply reduced to a question of belief. Whether or not I believe I am referring to the correct man, or if it is unknown to me whether there is another man who fits my definite description, I can still have an attributive and referential use, and apply a truth value to such uses. For example, consider the statement "The red book there is long." Now if for example I read this book and then utter this statement, I may be using it attributively, stating that the book is long. For an example of a referential use, someone may ask me, "Do you have a long book?" I can respond referentially and say, "The red book there is long," referring to the red book. Now in this example suppose that the book is really orange, but in a certain light it looks red to me, then I can still refer to the book by stating what I said, even though it may not really be the case. The item I referred to, even though it was orange and not red, is still long, and since I successfully referred to it, my statement was true. The same applies for the attributive use. Also, even if I believe the book to be orange but know that it is often

mistaken for a red book, I can use the statement "The red book is long" either attributively or referentially and still apply truth conditions to it.

It seems as though the truth of a statement comes after its interpretation, not in the immediate utterance. If I say, "The red book is long," even though it is really orange, if I do an immediate evaluation of the book without questioning beliefs, then the statement is false.⁴ The book is orange, not red. But if we interpret the statement after we have used it either attributively or referentially, the statement is true if we correctly refer and there is an audience. It seems there may be an ambiguity in this, but I think that it depends partially on when our statement is interpreted. Beliefs and interpretation are thus important in the sense of being able to correctly assign a truth value, for if no beliefs are considered, then the intention of the speaker can easily be lost.

So to conclude, beliefs seem not to impact Donnellan's theory so long as we consider the interpretation of a statement, not just the statement itself. Truth conditions may still be applied to definite descriptions via Donnellan's distinction. Kripke's idea of the semantic referent may work as well, but he has not shown fully that Donnellan's theory does not have semantic import and or that it has no effect on Russell's theory of denoting phrases.

⁴ It also seems that even though the book may be orange and not red, the main property that I am predicating of the book is that it is long, so we are most concerned with this. In some sense I suppose this could be considered false since the book is orange, but the spoken statement still seems true; it is strange to just think of it as empty or false since it is obviously neither of these.

Works Cited

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