

The Thing that is Wrong with MacKay's Characterization

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I. Introduction

In “Mr. Donnellan and Humpty Dumpty on Referring,” Alfred MacKay gives his own characterization of referring, an alternative to the one given by Keith Donnellan in “Reference and Definite Descriptions.” It goes like this: referring is making knowable what we are talking about by way of using an expression which fits the object in question. “Failure to fit,” MacKay writes, “is failure to refer” (201). According to him, the advantage of his characterization over Donnellan’s is that it does not trivialize the intractable independence of language. That is, it does not allow for the possibility of a speaker to say one thing and mean another totally different thing—I cannot say, “My butternut squash bisque is cold,” and mean, “My butternut squash bisque is warm.” But inasmuch as MacKay’s characterization avoids this problem, it does so to the exclusion of ambiguous language, language that fits but fails to make knowable. On MacKay’s characterization, a phrase like “Look at the dog with one eye” does not refer because, on its own, it is *unknowable* whether it should be understood as “With only one of your eyes, look at the dog,” or “Look at the dog that has only one eye.” Of course, this conclusion is difficult

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to accept since it is rather intuitive that ambiguous language refers to something in spite of that something being unknowable. To be sure, this may not prove that MacKay's characterization is false, but certainly no characterization of referring that excludes ambiguous language can be complete. After all, ambiguity is not only common in everyday exchange, but also salient in philosophical discourse. Therefore, my aim is simply to refute by counterexample MacKay's characterization of referring on the grounds that it excludes ambiguity.

I begin by summarizing both Donnellan's and MacKay's characterizations. Following that, I introduce the problem of ambiguity, discuss its effect on MacKay's characterization, and show its solution if we accept Donnellan's characterization. Before concluding, I address two possible objections: whether it is safe to assume that ambiguous language refers, and whether I have misinterpreted what MacKay means by knowable.

II. Donnellan's Position and MacKay's Objection

Donnellan distinguishes two possible uses for definite descriptions: the *attributive use* and the *referential use*. Let us examine each of these in turn. A definite description used in the attributive way is meant to say something about whomever or whatever is the object (Donnellan 267). For example, if I said "the President of the United States runs a good campaign" and did so in the attributive way, the definite description—"the President of the United States"—would refer to presidents of the United States broadly, without having any particular person in mind. Indeed, we may even rephrase the statement as "If someone is the president of the United States, then he or she runs a good campaign." On the other hand, the referential use is used to help a speaker's audience pick out whom or what the speaker is talking about and then say something about that person or thing (Donnellan 267). For example, if I said "the President of the United States runs a good campaign" and did so in the referential way, the definite description would refer specifically to President Barack Obama, helping you, my audience, pick out the individual about whom I am talking.

Donnellan further explains three features of the referential use. First, definite descriptions used in the referential way are dispensable, i.e., a speaker can conceivably use another definite description to help his or her audience identify the same object. For example, rather than say, "the President of the United States runs a good campaign" I could have said, "the former senator of Illinois runs a good campaign," without varying from what I mean. Second, there may be an infinite number

of definite descriptions for any given object. For example, I can refer to Barack Obama using any one of the following: “the President of the United States on March 2, 2015 at 12:00 p.m.”; “the President of the United States on March 2, 2015 at 12:01 p.m.”; “the President of the United States on March 2, 2015 at 12:02 p.m.”; and so on.

Third and perhaps most importantly, definite descriptions need not be true descriptions, i.e., they need not *fit* their intended object. For example, I may say, “the Kenyan Muslim communist in the White House runs a good campaign,” and my audience may still pick out Barack Obama as the person about whom I am talking, even though he is neither Kenyan, nor Muslim, nor communist. The upshot of this is that, on Donnellan’s characterization, language possesses some flexibility; flexibility in which the intention of a speaker has some power over the words he or she uses.

MacKay rejects Donnellan’s conclusion that definite descriptions used in the referential way need not fit the object. Such a characterization, he argues, leads to a theory of meaning that bases itself too much on the speaker’s intentions and not enough on the “intractable independence of language” (199). On such a characterization, the speaker may abandon linguistic conventions altogether yet still refer. To illustrate, let us consider his own example. Suppose you and I are seated at a table, and on the table there is a book and rock. Intending to refer to the book, I ask, “Hand me the rock on the table.” In this instance, could we say that I have referred to the book? Surely not. But as he points out, on Donnellan’s characterization, we must concede that my use of “rock” refers (somehow) to the book. After all, Donnellan acknowledges that definite descriptions used in the referential way, such as this one, need not fit the object; indeed they may be totally false.

MacKay solves this problem by distinguishing between referring and making knowable. Making knowable is making it possible for a speaker’s audience to pick out whom or what we are talking about. This can be done in many ways, referring being just one of them. He explains that, in a sense, making knowable ought to be considered the genus of which referring is only one among many species. So what distinguishes referring from other ways of making knowable? MacKay answers that, “referring is making knowable what we are talking about, by way of using an expression which correctly describes the object in question” (198). Reconsider the previous example. On this view, my use of the word “rock” would not refer to the book because it is an incorrect use of the expression “rock.” By using “rock,” all I have done is made knowable what I am talking about by some means other than referring.

III. The Problem of Ambiguity

Because MacKay's criteria are essential to my argument, let us run through them one more time. Referring is (a) making knowable what we are talking about, by way of (b) using an expression that correctly describes the object in question. His criticism is that Donnellan has mistakenly overlooked (b). My criticism is that he has mistakenly ascribed (a). There are some instances in language when we use an expression that correctly describes the object in question but not in a way that makes what we are talking about knowable to our audience. One example of such instances is ambiguity.

Before proceeding, it will be helpful to distinguish ambiguity from vagueness even though both are used interchangeably in everyday language. To say that a word is vague means that there are borderline cases in which one cannot easily tell whether something falls under the extension of a word. To borrow an example from Codell Carter's book *A First Course in Logic*, "Angastache cana," a common North American plant, is vague because cana can cross-pollinate with rupestris, producing hybrids that are difficult or impossible to identify (63). In contrast, to say a word is ambiguous means that the word has different meanings. For example, "The tenant of 300 E. 433 N. Provo, Utah" is ambiguous because several tenants live in 300 E. 433 N. and new tenants regularly come and go. Thus the term has more than one meaning. It may be that both vagueness and ambiguity pose problems for MacKay's characterization, but in what follows we will consider only the problem posed by the latter.

Consider the following example. Suppose Biff and Hattie are a couple, and that one day Biff unknowingly says something offensive to Hattie regarding her smell. The following day, Biff notices that Hattie's attitude is unusually cold. Eventually Biff asks, "Hattie, what are you mad about?" To which Hattie responds, "I'm mad about the thing you said the other day." At this, Biff racks his brain but comes up with nothing. Hattie has used the expression "the thing you said the other day" to refer to Biff's offensive comment. Certainly, no one will argue that Hattie's expression incorrectly describes the object in question—after all, comments are utterances. Because the expression she uses is ambiguous (i.e., it could mean any one of several things) Hattie has not made knowable what she is talking about. Indeed, Biff has not the slightest possibility of figuring out what Hattie is mad about based on this expression alone. The result is an instance of referring that satisfies MacKay's second criteria—in order to refer, a speaker must use an expression which correctly describes the object in question—but fails to satisfy the first—a speaker must make that object knowable.

Consider another example that reinforces this point. Suppose Hattie tells Biff that the only way he can make it up to her would be to buy her some of her favorite apples. Biff asks, “Which apples are your favorite again?” Hattie answers, “You know, the red ones.” But as Biff peruses the produce aisle, he quickly realizes that Hattie’s description “the red ones” could mean anyone of several types of apples: Red Delicious, Gala, Fuji, Braeburn, Honeycrisp, Cripps Pink, or Cameo, to name a few. Here we encounter the same problem as before. Hattie has used the expression “the red ones” to refer to her favorite apples. No one will argue that Hattie’s expression incorrectly describes the object in question. That being said, because the expression she uses is ambiguous, Hattie has not made knowable what she is talking about—Biff has not the slightest possibility of figuring out Hattie’s favorite kind of apple based on this description alone. Again, the result is an instance of referring that satisfies (b) but not (a).

Consider a final example. The reader will notice that I have entitled this essay “The Thing that is Wrong with MacKay’s Characterization.” Here again the same problem arises. In using “the thing that is wrong with MacKay’s characterization,” I have not incorrectly described the object I have in mind. But based on this expression alone, the reader has no possible way of knowing what I am talking about. Put another way, there is nothing about the expression “the thing that is wrong with MacKay’s characterization” that makes it possible for the reader to know that I am talking about MacKay’s failure to include ambiguous language in his characterization of referring. And yet the expression still manages to refer. The point is this: though it may not be incorrect, MacKay’s characterization is incomplete. This point is made clearer when we consider effects of ambiguous language.

One problem of ambiguous language is equivocation. An equivocation occurs in an argument that is valid or strong only if some word or phrase is used consistently throughout the argument, but whose statements are true only if that word or phrase is used inconsistently (Carter 99). This is possible only if the word or phrase in question has more than one meaning. For example, consider the following argument:

1. Man is the only talking animal.
2. No woman is a man.
3. Therefore, no woman talks.

On MacKay’s characterization, equivocations like the one above would be difficult or impossible to explain because we would be committed to the view that no ambiguous word or phrase refers. On MacKay’s characterization, not only are ambiguous words and phrases excluded, but the fallacy of equivocation is inexplicable.

To my understanding, Donnellan's characterization does not encounter this problem. Since all of my examples use definite descriptions in the referential way, Donnellan would say that these could be replaced by other, more specific, definite descriptions. For example, rather than say, "I'm mad about the thing you said" Hattie could have said, "I'm mad about the stupid comment you made about my perfume." Or rather than say "the red ones are my favorite" she could have said, "the apples that you used to make last night's cobbler are my favorite." And rather than entitle this paper "The Thing that is Wrong with MacKay's Characterization," I could have entitled it "The Problem of Ambiguity." But the major advantage of Donnellan's characterization is not that it solves this problem; it is that it does not neglect a speaker's intentions. To be sure, in ordinary language, no one can say "Hand me that rock," and mean "Hand me that book." But words are not sacrosanct. They are flexible, subject to change. To be sure, determining the extent of that flexibility is not my aim. My aim has been simply to show that MacKay's characterization of referring makes language too rigid. Perhaps one final example of this will help. In the 1930 comedy *Animal Crackers*, Groucho Marx exclaims, "One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas." On its own, Groucho's statement is too ambiguous to make known what he is talking about—was Groucho in his pajamas when he shot the elephant, or was the elephant wearing Groucho's pajamas when he shot it? He then confirms the latter, "How he got in my pajamas I do not know." The point of this final example is to show that, until a speaker reveals his or her intentions—until Groucho clears up what he means—ambiguous language does not make knowable to the audience who or what is being referred to, and yet such language still refers.

I can think of two possible objections to this. One objection is that it is wrong of me to assume that ambiguous expressions refer. Maybe they do not refer. But if they do not refer, what do they do? Nothing? Presumably not, since we meaningfully use ambiguous expressions all the time in ordinary language. Moreover, it is safe to assume that ambiguous language refers because it is true by definition. As mentioned above, an ambiguous word or phrase is ambiguous because it means two different things (i.e., ambiguous words and phrases refer to two or more different objects). So it would wrong not to assume that ambiguous expressions refer.

Another possible objection is that I have misunderstood what MacKay means by making knowable. Perhaps, he would say that ambiguous language makes knowable but not known. I have two responses to this objection. First, MacKay's use of "knowable" is itself ambiguous. Perhaps a better word for MacKay's characterization is guessable. After all, nothing about the expression "the red ones" makes knowable to Biff which apples Hattie refers to, though it does make them "guessable." Thanks to the little

information this expression packs, Biff may count out green and yellow apples, making it possible for him to make a better guess, but it would be strange to say that the expression alone makes it possible for him to know the apples to which Hattie refers. Second, in the introduction of “Mr. Donnellan and Humpty Dumpty on Referring,” MacKay argues that the difference between making an expression “known” and making it “knowable” depends largely on the audience. For example, if I spoke Spanish to an audience that speaks only English, I would still be referring because, even though my words are not known, they are knowable. But in matters of ambiguity, the audience is not at issue—what is at issue is the language, the words themselves. Hence, the problem of ambiguity is not solved by MacKay’s delineation of “making known” and “making knowable.” Thus, ambiguity is a case in which language, not the audience nor the speaker, is to blame.

IV. Conclusion

In “Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again,” Donnellan responds to MacKay’s criticisms, though he never mentions the problem of ambiguity. Rather Donnellan shows that the distinction between the two uses of definite descriptions—the attributive and the referential—can be drawn from the terminology MacKay prefers. He also shows that the consequences MacKay attributes to his characterization of referring, those of a theory based too much on the speaker’s intentions, do not materialize.

I have shown something quite different. Rather than reconcile MacKay’s terminology with Donnellan’s or disabuse the reader of MacKay’s criticism that Donnellan’s characterization leads to an unruly theory of meaning, I have shown that MacKay’s characterization does not account for ambiguity. For that reason it is an incomplete characterization. Though my aim is not to fix it, let me briefly suggest one possible solution. Perhaps part of the reason MacKay fails is because he tries too hard to preserve the intractable independence of language without any consideration for the role of a speaker’s intentions. The result is an incomplete characterization. Indeed, perhaps the same could be true of any characterization that relies too much on the intentions of a speaker and not enough on the intractable independence of language. But that is not the point; the point is that perhaps the best characterization of referring is the one that reconciles these two elements rather than puts them at odds.

Works Cited

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