

Vindicating a Critique

JASON A. HILLS

IN “Reference and Definite Descriptions,” Keith Donnellan distinguishes between attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions. He uses this distinction to show that Bertrand Russell’s theory of definite descriptions fails to account for the referential use. Saul Kripke, in “Speaker’s Reference and Semantic Reference,” claims that to successfully provide a counterexample to Russell’s theory, Donnellan’s distinction should be semantic rather than pragmatic. Kripke then argues that Donnellan’s referential use is actually pragmatic—not semantic—and therefore does not refute Russell’s theory.

A significant part of this debate concerns truth-values. Kripke argues that Donnellan’s assignment of truth-value to sentences such as “Her husband is kind to her,” where “her husband” is used referentially, does not differ from the assignment given by Russell’s theory. I will consider this claim; using the concept of *analysis* I will argue that the two theories do offer different accounts of truth-value. I will also argue that even a pragmatic ambiguity, as given by Donnellan, is sufficient to prove that Russell does not offer a complete account of reference.

Russell’s Theory, In Brief

Without going into detail nor considering his argumentation in favor of it, I will briefly outline Russell’s theory. In his essay “On Denoting,” Russell presents a method of translating English sentences into a format where the logical proposition contained in a sentence is not hidden by the grammar of normal English sentences (213–14). The grammatical similarity of “Elizabeth is old” and “the Queen of England is old” suggests that

Jason A. Hills is a senior studying philosophy at Brigham Young University. His interests include philosophy of language, logic, and philosophy of mathematics.

the denoting phrase “the Queen of England” fills the same role in the second sentence as “Elizabeth” does in the first. In the proposition expressed, “Elizabeth” represents a person, so it might be assumed that “the Queen of England” does as well. Actually, the propositions expressed by these two sentences differ greatly. The proposition for the first one has the subject “Elizabeth” and the predicate “is old.” On the other hand, the short version of Russell’s rendering of the second sentence is “ x rules England and x is female and x is human and x is old, and ‘if y rules England and y is female and y is old then y is x ’ is always true (of y) is sometimes true (of x).”¹

Russell is particularly concerned with problems of nonexistence in connection with denoting terms (215). His rendering of sentences such as “The present King of France is old,” shows that these sentences are false, as they fail on the first half of the proposition “there is one and only one King of France” (218). The conjunction of this false statement with the other half of the proposition, whether true or false, still yields a false statement.

Donnellan’s Claim

Donnellan distinguishes between two uses of definite descriptions: the attributive use and the referential use (249). Among other things, he claims that Russell’s theory, at best, only gives an account of the attributive use—it does not account for the referential use of definite descriptions. Distinguishing between denoting and referring, he also argues that while Russell might give a correct account of denotation, he fails to do so for reference (253).

Let us look at Donnellan’s distinction between attributive and referential uses. The attributive use is employed by a speaker in a more general way to talk about whoever or whatever fits the description. Consider the following example: At a party he is hosting, the chairman of the local Teetotalers Union is informed that someone is drinking a martini. He asks his informer, “Who is the man drinking a martini?” The chairman does not have a particular individual in mind when he asks this, but rather is concerned with identifying whoever fits the description (250).

The referential use, however, is used by a speaker as a device to pick out a particular object. Consider another party. An interesting-looking man is holding a martini glass. A woman sees him and asks her friend, “Who is the man drinking a martini?” She is not interested in whether or not this

¹For the sake of convenience, I will hereafter use shorter versions of the Russellian translations. For example, the above translation becomes “there is one and only one Queen of England, and that one is old.” Shortened versions should be treated as placeholders for the actual Russell translations and not be mistaken for them.

particular man is drinking a martini; rather, her interest is in pointing out a particular man—"the man drinking a martini" is simply a tool for doing so. Note that it is not even essential that the man fit the description; the reference can still work if, say, the man in question were actually drinking water from his martini glass.

Although Russell's theory might account for attributive uses of a sentence, it fails to do so for referential uses. For Russell, a statement of the form "The ϕ is ψ " (or, for that matter, any statement about "the ϕ ") logically entails that there is one and only one ϕ . This does not work for referential uses, as they clearly refer to objects, even when no object uniquely satisfies the description.

Donnellan therefore suggests that we make a distinction between denotation and reference. He suggests that we use Russell's definition of denoting ("a definite description denotes an entity if that entity fits the description uniquely"), but that we also allow for reference to take place separate from denotation (253). Let us adapt one of Donnellan's examples to illustrate this. Suppose I were to say in 2007, "The winner of the 2008 Presidential Election will be from a minority group." It seems that my words denote something, because there really is one and only one object which will satisfy "the winner of the 2008 Presidential Election." Suppose that Barack Obama were to win the election; could we really say that I *referred* to him with my sentence? Now let us suppose that Mitt Romney were to win; could we say that I referred to *him*? No matter who happens to win the election, I did not know who it would be at the time that I made my statement, so I could not have referred to either of them—that is, I could not have been using "the winner of the 2008 Presidential Election" as a tool to point out a particular person. It seems preferable to make a distinction between denoting and referring.

Kripke's Rebuttal

In his paper "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference," Saul Kripke claims that Donnellan's views do not adequately argue against Russell's theory (263). He argues for this claim in at least two ways: (1) the examination of truth-value and (2) the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. First, he looks at truth-value in cases of intensional context (254). For example, if a person sees a man being kind to a woman and remarks that "her husband is kind to her" while the man is in fact not her husband, and especially if her actual husband were cruel or if she had none, it is presumed that Donnellan and Russell would give different accounts of truth-value. Under Russell's view, it seems we would have to

say that the sentence is false. Under Donnellan's, we would say that since the speaker was using the term "her husband" referentially, he made a true statement about the man he saw. But Kripke notes that Donnellan is hesitant to say very clearly that this man's statement "her husband is kind to her" is *true*—and this becomes even more difficult to sustain in intensional contexts (253–54).

Suppose that John was the speaker who said, "Her husband is kind to her," mistakenly using "her husband" to describe this other man. Would we want to report this occasion by saying, "John said that her husband is kind to her"? Suppose that this other man were her lover; would we want to report it by saying, "John said that her lover is kind to her"? It is difficult to decide what the original statement was so that we can report it properly. It is equally difficult to decide if the original statement is true or false.

Without being able to say that *the statement* is true or false, we can observe no difference in the truth-values of the views of Russell and Donnellan (except perhaps that Donnellan fails to give one in these cases); and if we observe no difference in truth-values, then Donnellan has not produced a counterexample to Russell's theory.

Kripke's second point—and to be fair, the focus of his paper—is a distinction between speaker's reference and semantic reference (254). He claims that Donnellan's referential use is a pragmatic—rather than semantic—notation, and that when something is referred to other than the object satisfying the conditions of the denoting phrase, we can accurately speak of two references: the speaker's intended reference, and the semantic reference given by the denoting phrase (255). As I intend to grant Kripke this point, but to show that this can be taken to correspond with Donnellan's reference and denotation, I shall not here give Kripke's argumentation.

Kripke then shows that if a Russellian language were a natural language, it would be possible for speakers to use it pragmatically, just as we use English (257–58). Suppose, for example, that the woman at the party had said to her friend, "The man drinking a martini is tall." If she were a Russellian speaker, she might say, every bit as naturally as we speak normal English, "There is one and only one person at this party drinking a martini, and that one is tall." Even though the semantics of that language would point at someone other than the speaker's intended reference or at no one at all, she would still be successful in pragmatically referring to her intended target as she communicates with her friend. Russell's theory, then, deals with this situation as well as Donnellan's view, and given two theories that explain phenomena equally well, we should choose the one which does not posit an ambiguity (Kripke 259).

A Note on the Scope of Theories

In order to make his argument that Donnellan does not contradict Russell, Kripke finds it necessary to make several assumptions regarding the scope of the theories in question. For example, he regards Russell's theory as a theory about English (semantics), and he considers Donnellan's distinction between referential and attributive uses as being semantic in nature when used by Donnellan, hoping to contradict Russell (254, 257). He admits, however, that there may be other possible interpretations of the scope of these terms in Donnellan's view, saying, "I therefore am not sure whether I am expressing disagreement with him even here" (249).

We might, for example, consider Russell's theory as a theory of reference. It looks like Russell was trying to give a theory of reference—at the very least, people have thought that he was doing so. If this is the case, then Donnellan does succeed in contradicting Russell's theory, and Kripke's noting that the referential use is a pragmatic notion is irrelevant because even though speaker's reference is different from semantic reference, it is still reference. Russell's theory fails to give an account of speaker's reference and how it works. This could be what Donnellan means when he considers how Russell's theory might account for the attributive use but certainly fails to do so for the referential. Also, Donnellan certainly seems to distinguish between referring and denoting in much the same way that Kripke distinguishes between speaker's reference and semantic reference. Donnellan accepts Russell's semantic definition of denotation, and he proposes an idea of reference that would allow for pragmatic considerations. At the very least, each of Donnellan's terms seems to be coextensive with the Kripkean term I propose to be its counterpart.

I agree with Kripke here—and I presume Donnellan could as well—that if we regard Russell's theory as a theory of English semantics, then Donnellan's view offers no counterexample. So, perhaps we should clarify Donnellan's conclusion and say instead that although Russell's theory might give a correct account of semantic reference (what Donnellan calls "denoting"), it fails to account for pragmatic reference and therefore is not a complete theory of reference.

Truth-value

One of the interesting claims made by Kripke which does not depend upon our regarding Russell's theory as a theory of English is the assignment of truth-value to a proposition. This is where Kripke proposes we disregard Donnellan's disclaimer that referential and attributive uses should not be

seen to posit a semantic ambiguity but instead a pragmatic one. Kripke claims that this does not represent how Donnellan actually treats these terms throughout the bulk of his paper (254). I will quote Kripke here and produce a counterexample. Speaking of Donnellan's disclaimer and his conclusion that Russell deals with attributive but not referential cases, Kripke says:

It is not "uses," in some pragmatic sense, but senses of a sentence which can be analyzed. If the sentence is not (syntactically or) semantically ambiguous, it has only one analysis; to say that it has two distinct analyses is to attribute a syntactic or semantic ambiguity to it. (254)

This is simply not the case. There are a multitude of examples from pragmatics in which more than one analysis is possible. Take, for example, the question "Do you know the time?" Let us assume that we have eliminated all possible semantic and syntactic ambiguities from this question. Is there only one analysis possible? No, I can understand this question in multiple ways. Certainly someone unfamiliar with our cultural usage of this question could give a different analysis of the question asked and respond with "yes" instead of giving the time ("5:45PM") or at the very least be puzzled about the correct response to give.

Kripke might reply that I am not using the term "analysis" properly, to which I would ask how I should use it. Presumably, he would want me to say that it applies to what the words mean, rather than to what the speaker intends. This is a nice interpretation; it assumes everything Kripke argues in the above quotation, making it tautologically true. The only problem is that it seems to be an unnecessarily limited application of the term "analysis." I suggest that every possible proposition that a string of words can be utilized to communicate represents a possible analysis. Some of these different propositions are based on syntactic ambiguities, some on semantics, and some are even differences due to pragmatics, but each proposition is a possible analysis of the sentence.¹

It seems, then, that we can take Donnellan's disclaimer at face value and presume that he really is positing a pragmatic ambiguity rather than a semantic one. In this case, Donnellan's view gives a different account of truth-value than Russell's does. Let us look at the party example again. The woman is speaking with her friend about the tall man she sees holding a martini glass. Let us suppose, however, that there is only water in his glass

¹If it were still insisted I not use "analysis" in the way I am using it here, I would ask for another term to answer to the "possible propositions" described above. In this paper, I will continue using "analysis" as I have defined it.

and that there is, unbeknownst to the woman, a short man at the other end of the room who is actually drinking a martini. When the woman says, “The man drinking the martini is tall,” she is saying something true of the man she intended to refer to—that is, if we analyze the statement to mean something like “That man is tall,” then she said something true. Of course, while it seems clear that the woman is referring to the man she was looking at, we must say that the semantic reference (denotation) of “the man drinking a martini” points elsewhere, to the short man at the other end of the room. Russell’s semantic account of reference would conclude that the woman’s statement is false, as that man is certainly not tall.

Some of Kripke’s argumentation remains to be dealt with. He notes that Donnellan is rightly reluctant in saying of these sorts of statements that *the statement* is true or false. While Donnellan might say that the woman said something true *of that man*, he would not say that it is true that “The man drinking a martini is tall.” But this is not as damaging to Donnellan as it might seem. Indeed, this type of problem (being unable to assign a truth-value directly to an unanalyzed statement) seems true of many ambiguities. The statement “I have never touched a mouse” is semantically ambiguous—or to eliminate any difficulties possibly resulting from using the indexical “I,” let us say, “Abraham Lincoln never touched a mouse.” I presume that the sixteenth President of the United States of America had occasion to touch one of those rodents; but I do not believe he ever saw a computer, nor any input device for one. Here is a semantic ambiguity; and, strictly speaking, it does not seem we can say that the statement “Abraham Lincoln never touched a mouse” is either true or false, as it is not perfectly clear which type of mouse we are talking about. Though once we have made our analysis of the sentence, we can talk about each possible proposition as being either true or false.² If we give the analysis that “mouse” is used for the rodent, then the proposition is false. If we give the analysis that “mouse” is the input device, then the proposition is true. If we decide that “mouse” is intentionally ambiguous and applies to both, then the sentence is false. In each case, we cannot truly talk about the truth or falsity of the statement itself—only of the propositions expressed.

It might also be good to note that our decision about which semantic analysis to make is actually influenced by pragmatics anyway. Neither the semantics nor the syntax of the sentence gives us enough information to decide on one analysis over the other. Rather, it is our knowledge about Abraham Lincoln and when he lived, as well as certain expectations about how other speakers make relevant statements, which encourages the rodent interpretation over the computer interpretation.

²This is probably akin to, but perhaps more inclusive than, P. F. Strawson’s distinction between a sentence and the use of a sentence.

Other cases of ambiguity, including pragmatic cases like those presented by Donnellan, work in much the same way as this semantic case. If by “the man drinking a martini” we mean “that man over there,” then the proposition is true. But if we mean “the man fitting the semantic description of ‘the man drinking a martini,’” (that is, if we are using “the man drinking a martini” attributively) then the proposition is false. It does not seem to be any fault of Donnellan’s view that it cannot speak of a statement as being true or false—strictly speaking, other theories dealing with any sort of ambiguity cannot either. And when it looks like they can speak of a statement being true or false, it is because either all possible analyses will produce the same result, or at least all pragmatically reasonable analyses do—but even here, “The statement is true” is only shorthand for saying that all possible or reasonable propositions are true.

As a final note, Kripke also produces instances of intensional context as he argues against Donnellan. One example he gives is my saying, “Jones said the police were around the corner.” He mentions that Jones may have said it as a warning, but that there is no need for me to report it as a warning. Similarly, there is no need to report a sentence as having either referential or attributive sense in it. So going back to the party example, there would be no reason, according to Kripke, for me to report the woman’s statement differently than “She said that the man drinking a martini was tall.” He contrasts this with cases of semantic ambiguity where I must use the same sense as the original speaker; for example, if I say, “Jones denied he was ever at a bank,” I need to use “bank” in the same sense he did.

Again, this does not seem to be the case. While it is correct that I do not need to have the same intentions as the original speaker, it does seem that I need to communicate enough information for a person to correctly disambiguate the statement. Even the semantic example utilizes pragmatics as we decide which sense to give to “bank.” We recognize that “deny” typically regards some sort of allegation and are therefore led to conclude that Jones referred to a financial institution, since financial institutions seem to be more likely associated with these sorts of allegations than sides of rivers (though, of course, both are possible analyses). We could have easily provided this kind of pragmatic clue for the first example by saying something like, “Jones *warned* [them] that the police were around the corner.” If our goal is to correctly represent the utterance made, we should include these sorts of pragmatic clues as we report statements. In the case of the woman’s, we might use some sort of circumlocution and bring her utterance into direct context, saying, “She thought that the man she was looking at was drinking a martini and so she said, ‘The man drinking a martini is tall.’” Yes, it is long-winded, but then, it is no longer than a Russellian

translation. It also has the advantage of communicating the relevant details of the utterance, both semantic and pragmatic.

Perhaps this answer to truth-value in cases of intensional context is not entirely satisfactory. Nevertheless, an entire account of intensional context does not seem necessary to provide a counterexample to Russell's theory. Donnellan can still grant that intensional contexts produce difficulties without having to concede his main point, because examples in direct context still produce different truth-values. Also, it seems that the difficulty involved with referential uses in intensional context comes primarily from our underreporting the pragmatic aspect of the utterance rather than from an inability to correctly report the referential or attributive use.

In conclusion, Kripke's attempt to show that the distinction between referential and attributive uses must be taken as a semantic ambiguity in order to be consistent with Donnellan's claims is flawed. Donnellan's posited ambiguity can therefore be considered pragmatic in nature—as he intended—without impacting his claims about Russell's theory. If we consider Donnellan's view on the grounds he proposes, then it provides substantial counterexamples to Russell's theory, showing that although Russell's theory might offer a complete account of denotation, it does not do so for reference.³

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Works Cited

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