On Referring Referentially

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Philosophy of language has for some time been attempting to establish a resilient theory of reference. In what cases does a speaker succeed in referring to something with language, and in what cases does a speaker fail to refer to anything at all? In an attempt to provide a robust answer to this question, many philosophers continue to debate about whether a semantic or pragmatic approach should be adopted. Surely, the meanings of words are important—if they were not, we would not have any use for language in the first place—but many examples of reference can be given in which a speaker's intentions seem more important than the exact meaning of the words he or she uses. If we give the intention behind a speaker's words too much weight, however, we may fail to give sufficient credit to language itself and run the risk of claiming that words are meaningless. The importance of this debate is apparent in certain situations where different criteria would qualify different things as reference. Suppose, for example, I see a man with a martini glass and ask, "who is the man drinking the martini?" If it happens to be the case that he actually has water in his martini glass, then some would argue that I have not referred to the man, and in fact, that I have not referred to anything at all. Semantic theories, specifically, would indicate that I had failed to refer,

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as the meaning of the phrase I used does not pick out any one thing in reality. The pragmatic approach seeks to resolve this by allowing a speaker's intention to play a part in determining the object of reference. It seems as though I have indeed referred to the man in the example, and a robust theory of reference should be able to account for that.

This debate between semantic and pragmatic theories has taken center stage in a dialogue between Keith Donnellan and Alfred MacKay. In "Reference and Definite Descriptions," Donnellan argues for a pragmatic theory of reference, claiming that definite descriptions can be used in two different ways, attributively and referentially. Donnellan criticizes prior theories, such as that of Bertrand Russell, for failing to recognize this distinction and argues that it must be acknowledged if we are to find a successful theory of reference. Alfred MacKay, however, in "Mr. Donnellan and Humpty Dumpty on Referring," pushes back against Donnellan's pragmatic approach and argues that what Donnellan calls "referential uses of definite descriptions" should not be classified as reference at all. He claims that while such uses may succeed in informing the audience of what is being spoken, it is not appropriate to grant these usages the title of reference. I will argue that MacKay's criteria for reference are too strict. I suggest that if we adjust his criteria appropriately, the referential use Donnellan describes generally does qualify as reference. I will first explore Donnellan's argument for the validity of the distinction between the attributive and referential use. I will then examine MacKay's arguments against Donnellan's claim that his definition for the referential use does actually refer. Finally, I will put forward my own argument by analyzing each of MacKay's criteria and demonstrating that they do not quite capture the idea of reference, as some of his criteria seem unnecessary and others seem too inflexible. I will conclude by proposing amendments to his criteria, which will lead us to a more encompassing and robust theory of reference.

Donnellan's attributive use encapsulates a purely semantic notion of reference. According to Donnellan, an attributive use occurs when someone uses a description and further presupposes that something or other fits that description without necessarily intending that some specific thing is what is picked out. In an attributive use of a definite description, the content of the description is essential to the meaning—the speaker is talking about whomever (or whatever) it is that the description applies to. The referential use, on the other hand, occurs when the speaker intends to pick out a specific person or thing, and the description is just one way of accomplishing that but not itself essential to the content of what is being said. Thus, the referential use is just one way of picking out the intended subject of discourse and is used to communicate a speaker's intent without making any claims about the intended object of reference.

To illustrate this distinction, Donnellan uses the sentence "Smith's murderer is insane" (Donnellan 285), giving one scenario where the sentence is used attributively and another where it is used referentially. In the first instance, someone has come across the mangled body of Smith and deduces from the gruesome scene that whoever it was that murdered Smith must be insane. In this case, the speaker uses "Smith's murderer" attributively. It is essential to the meaning of the sentence that there is actually a person who murdered Smith. In the other scenario, Jones is on trial for the murder of Smith and is behaving strangely during the trial. Someone present at the trial, upon observing Jones' behavior, states, "Smith's murderer is insane." Here, the sentence is clearly about Jones, whether Jones actually murdered Smith or not. That Jones (or anyone at all) actually murdered Smith is not essential to the speaker accomplishing his purpose in declaring that Jones is insane. Even though it does presuppose that Jones murdered Smith, the speaker is not committed to that fact and does not fail to refer if it is false. Perhaps he is unaware of Jones' name and refers to him using the definite description as a matter of convenience. Given the context of this situation, others present will be able to easily discern whom the speaker is talking about. Donnellan claims that in such cases the speaker may succeed in referring even though neither he nor his audience actually believes anything at all fits the description. He gives another example to support this, where the object of reference is the king of some country. Someone who doesn't believe that the man sitting on the throne should be the king, say he's a usurper, may ask to have an audience with the king even though he doesn't believe anyone rightly fits that description. He still refers to the man generally recognized as the king. Perhaps the king's servants agree that he is not the rightful king and also believe that no one fits that description. Nevertheless, they understand who the speaker is referring to when he uses "the king" to refer (Donnellan 291). From these examples, it seems clear that definite descriptions can indeed refer in two different ways.

MacKay contends that the referential use, as Donnellan describes it, does not refer at all if the object of intended reference does not fit the definite description used. He claims that referring is one way of making it knowable what you are talking about, but it is not the only way, that is, even if one has made known what they're talking about to some audience, they may have done so without referring. MacKay claims that four things are important for genuine reference: "(1) the speaker's intentions; (2) . . . the ostensible referring expression used (*o.r.e.*); (3) the object of intended reference; and (4) the audience" (MacKay 199). According to MacKay, Donnellan's theory of referential uses effectively ignores condition (2) and relies mostly on (1) and (4). MacKay argues that if we disregard the importance of (2) we

run the risk of making reference entirely subjective. If we concede that some definite descriptions can refer even though the *o.r.e.* doesn't quite apply to the object of intended reference, where do we draw the line? If all that matters is that we intend to refer and that the audience can, with context, know of whom we are speaking, then according to MacKay, we can use any definite description we'd like and reference becomes entirely subjective. He compares Donnellan to Humpty Dumpty in *Through the Looking-Glass*, who says, "When *I* use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less" (MacKay 200). Humpty Dumpty here reduces all meaning to the speaker's intent, and MacKay believes that Donnellan has done the same thing with reference. MacKay recognizes that Donnellan uses examples where the definite descriptions are merely near misses—they don't apply to the intended referent, but they do get pretty close, or maybe the audience believes that they do actually apply—but he argues that according to Donnellan's claims, the definite descriptions needn't be near misses, any description will do.

In order to determine whether MacKay is right about referential uses not actually referring, we must first determine what it means to refer. Are MacKay's criteria for referring suitable? The speaker's intentions do seem important. It seems like a stretch to claim that someone could refer without intending to. Even if this is not self-evident, however, MacKay has explicitly stated that it is important and Donnellan endorses it implicitly throughout his paper. Since MacKay and Donnellan both agree on this point, we will continue under the supposition that intending to refer (MacKay's first criterion) is a necessary condition for reference taking place. The object of intended reference (criterion 3) is also clearly necessary. If there is nothing to refer to, reference simply cannot occur. If the speaker does not have a specific referent in mind, then they are using the expression attributively, and, according to Donnellan's theory of attributive uses, they will succeed in referring only if there is some object which fits the description. In the referential use, Donnellan himself admits that if there is no object of intended reference, even though unlikely, the expression will fail to refer. So we all agree that the object of intended reference plays a necessary part in reference occurring. We have then established that (1) and (3) are indeed not only important but necessary for referring.

But what about conditions (2) and (4)? The importance of the audience certainly seems suspect. If one speaks while alone, to no one in particular, does the speaker fail to refer due to the lack of an audience? Perhaps it might be the case that the audience always includes the speaker. This does preclude the necessity of the listeners understanding what the speaker is trying to pick out—even if no one else understands, the speaker knows what he or she is trying to refer to, and thus at least one person in

the audience recognizes the referent. The speech act does not accomplish its purpose of communicating to the listeners what the speaker is thinking of, but that is not necessarily a failure to refer. It is just a failure of communication. However, this seems to defeat the purpose of claiming that the audience is important. If the speaker is included as part of the audience, then (4) would always be trivially satisfied. We will proceed then with the assumption that the speaker is not part of the audience, at least in the sense "audience" is used in (4). So we continue with the question of what importance, if any, the audience has in successful reference. Surely, if I speak of the square root of 25 to someone who has no understanding of square roots, I have not failed to refer to five, the listener has simply failed to grasp the referent. Is some understanding in the audience truly necessary? It seems that I can succeed in referring, using a definite description, even if my audience does not grasp the referent. In the given case, however, condition (2) was fulfilled. So it seems that the audience is not important for successful reference, at least not if the *o.r.e.* is applicable to the intended object of reference.

It remains to be seen, then, whether (2) is in fact as important as MacKay claims, or more specifically, if it is necessary for the *o.r.e.* to accurately pick out the object of intended reference. Should we allow near misses to refer, or must we strictly require *o.r.e.*'s to be accurate to be able to refer? If we allow near misses, where do we draw the line? To thoroughly explore solutions to this question, I will first examine another example that Donnellan gives, and then I will discuss the importance of context in understanding the meaning of definite descriptions. I will thereby argue that MacKay's criteria are insufficient for reference.

One example of a referential use that Donnellan gives is particularly interesting for our purposes. He gives one sentence and examines various scenarios in which it may or may not be said to refer. The sentence he uses is, "Is the man carrying a walking stick the professor of history?" (Donnellan 295). The clearest scenario would be if there is one man carrying a walking stick, and in this scenario, reference has certainly occurred. It is the scenarios which are not so clear, however, which will be more helpful to our investigation. Donnellan supposes that the man was actually carrying an umbrella and believes that in such a case he would still succeed in referring. He further supposes that what he perceived as a man with a walking stick was in fact a large rock that perhaps looked like a man from a distance. Even in this case, Donnellan thinks, "I still have referred to something, to the thing over there that happens to be a rock but that I took to be a man" (Donnellan 296). This does seem to be an extreme case, and maybe we should draw the line here. The *o.r.e.* used doesn't fit the object of intended reference at all. If Donnellan had gestured towards the rock, and we considered his gesture

to be part of the *o.r.e.*, perhaps then the *o.r.e.* could be considered to be at least partly applicable to the rock. But he did have what turned out to be a rock in mind when he attempted to refer, and his audience presumably gathered from the context that he was referring to the rock. Given that they understood he intended to speak about the rock, they would likely be inclined to point out that it was a rock and not a man with a walking stick. But has Donnellan on that basis failed to refer? We will explore this example in greater depth later on.

Donnellan finally supposes, using still the same example, that there was not a man carrying a walking stick, or a rock, or anything at all when he made his query. He believes that this would be a case where there was actually a failure to refer. He generalizes this and states that referential uses can only fail to refer when "there be nothing of which it can be said, 'That is what he was referring to'" (Donnellan 296). While MacKay made the claim that Donnellan's theory relied on (1) and (4), according to Donnellan's statement here, he in fact believes it relies the most on (1) and (3). There can only be a failure of reference in the case where the object the speaker thinks he is referring to doesn't actually exist. It would seem then that as long as there is an object that the speaker intended to refer to, Donnellan thinks that he succeeds in referring, regardless of the applicability of the *o.r.e.* This isn't a large strike against MacKay's analysis, however, because clearly when (1) and (3) are not fulfilled, (4) cannot possibly be fulfilled— the audience can't know what thing a speaker is talking about if he is not talking about any actual thing. Indeed, in all the cases where Donnellan believes reference occurs successfully, the audience is able to pick out what he is referring to. Further, in all cases of successful reference, (1), (3), and (4) are all satisfied and pick out one single object. In some of these cases the *o.r.e.* applies completely to the referenced object; in others only part of the *o.r.e.* applies; and in others the *o.r.e.* does not apply at all. It seems to be the case, then, that Donnellan finds the applicability of the *o.r.e.* unimportant.

Donnellan, then, has offered a strongly pragmatic theory in which the importance of semantics is represented by the attributive use, but the referential use delegates reference largely to intent with little regard for semantics. This theory stands in stark contrast to early theories of reference put forward by logicians such as Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege. These theories were entirely semantic and posited that the meaning of the expression used was all that did any work in determining the object of reference. MacKay, in establishing his criteria for reference, does take a slightly more pragmatic approach than these early semantic theories. He gives importance both to the speaker's intent and the audience, and we can thus see that he believes expressions alone can't do all the work in referring. He does believe, however, that "the pendulum has swung too

far" (MacKay 198) in the direction of thinking that people, rather than words, refer. It seems that MacKay thinks the pendulum should sit right in the middle, that people and expressions should both play an important part in referring. On MacKay's reading of Donnellan, people refer, and words play only a minimal part. But in both MacKay's and Donnellan's theory, it's clear that words don't do all the work. MacKay simply believes that words play a much larger part than Donnellan gives them credit for. What part do words actually play in referring? Are they essential, as MacKay believes, or are they simply a vehicle for the speaker's intent, as Donnellan believes? Or does their role fall somewhere in the middle?

I believe that the importance of the *o.r.e.* used lies in a spectrum. In referring, the speaker and his intent play a fixed role and the *o.r.e.* and the context of the utterance do the rest of the necessary work together. Let us consider some examples that illustrate what I mean. Suppose you and I are sitting on a bench. There is one other person in sight; he is carrying a walking stick. I ask you, "Is the man carrying a walking stick the professor of history?" In this case, I have certainly succeeded in referring to the man. I intended to refer to him, he fits the description used, and there is no one else in sight that might fit the description. Thus I have done my part, in attempting to refer, and my words and the context have done their part, as my words uniquely identify one thing out of the miscellaneous things currently present to our senses. Now suppose that there are two men, both carrying walking sticks. I see both men, but I only see that one of them has a walking stick. You can see that they both have walking sticks. I again ask, "Is the man carrying a walking stick the professor of history?" Here I have certainly failed to refer. I intended to refer to one of the two men, namely, the one that I saw was carrying a walking stick. The intended object of reference certainly exists, and the *o.r.e.* used certainly applies. However, the audience was unable to grasp who I was talking about, and it seems the reference failed before even getting to the audience. What fails here is that the *o.r.e.* does not uniquely pick out one object from the things present in our field of view. Now, the field of view isn't so important—we can certainly refer to things we are unable to see—I am using it here simply to represent the context, for which an exact definition eludes my grasp. But nevertheless, in the given context, the *o.r.e.* is unable to uniquely latch onto the intended object of reference, and thus I fail to refer.

In light of the preceding analysis of MacKay's criteria and the given examples, I would propose a series of amendments to them. (1) and (3) do seem to be necessary for referring. I don't see why (4) would be necessary. We have seen cases where the understanding of the audience has no bearing on whether or not the speaker succeeds in referring. MacKay doesn't say much about what importance the audience holds and perhaps only includes this

condition to be able to be more consistent when explaining his thoughts on Donnellan's view. In cases where referring fails, (4) seems to fail only after the failure of reference itself, and thus plays no part in causing the failure of reference. I would then discard (4) entirely as a requirement for reference. And finally, I would amend (2) to involve context. I believe that reference occurs when the following holds: (1) the speaker intends to refer (identical to (1) in MacKay); (2) there is an existing object *x* that the speaker intends to refer to (similar to (3) in MacKay); and (3) the ostensible referring expression (*o.r.e.*) fits the object *x* better than it fits any other thing present in the context of the speech act (an extension of (2) in MacKay).

I believe these criteria for reference achieve an appropriate compromise between MacKay's view and Donnellan's view—the meanings of words play an important part, but we can still succeed in referring even if we have misconceptions about the thing we're referring to. We have allayed MacKay's concerns, in that, given a book and a rock on a table, we can't refer to the book with the expression "the rock on the table" (MacKay 201). If the book is in context, the rock is as well and thus would be the object picked out by the *o.r.e.* used. I don't think Donnellan would consent to such an attempt at reference anyway, but regardless, we have appeased MacKay. We can likewise never refer to anything besides the number five with the expression "the square root of 25" (MacKay 201), as employing such an expression necessarily brings the abstract object five (along with all the rest of the numbers) into the context of the speech act. We can also succeed in referring to a rock with the expression "the man carrying a walking stick," as long as there is nothing that better fits that expression in the given context. One might argue that it is doubtful whether such an expression could fit a rock at all, and given the expression on its own, I would agree. We can thus appreciate the importance of context and how crucial a role it plays. If the speaker gestures ostensibly in a certain direction while using an expression, he narrows the context to only include things in that direction. The more narrow the context gets, the more lax we can be with how well an *o.r.e.* must fit the object of intended reference. Furthermore, this seems to be able to account for both the referential uses and the attributive uses. In referential uses, context is much more significant in picking out the referent than the applicability of the *o.r.e.*, and in attributive uses, the applicability of the *o.r.e.* plays a much more significant role than the context does.

I will not attempt to develop a full theory of context in this paper. I believe, however, that context is a fairly intuitive concept, so I will simply give some indication of its nature and the role it plays in referring, to assist the readers' intuitions. In the attributive use of "Smith's murderer is insane," the context would probably include the entire human race—whoever actually killed Smith (assuming someone did) will get picked out.

If no one killed Smith, say he died in an accident, or he was killed by a group of people, then no one will be picked out, as we would expect—there is no one person to whom the *o.r.e.* is applicable. In the referential use of "Smith's murderer is insane," on the other hand, the context is quite narrow. In the case given, we are in the courthouse, Jones is on trial for the murder of Smith, and there are no other suspects. In this case, the context alone is sufficient to inform a listener that we are using the *o.r.e.* to refer to Jones. In all cases, context can be narrowed or widened by any number of things—it might be narrowed by gestures, or the previous topics in the same discussion, or widened by common interests among friends, or names used in the *o.r.e.* With "the square root of 25," for example, the name "25" refers to a number, and thereby brings numbers and other associated mathematical concepts into the present context, so that "the square root of 25" can succeed in picking out the number 5. It would take much more room than I have available to be able to discuss all of the things that might widen or narrow the context that assists in referring, but I hope I have illustrated what sort of things those might be.

   In conclusion, I've argued that MacKay's criticism of Donnellan relies on an uncharitable reading, and that Donnellan did not intend much of what MacKay ascribed to him. Further, MacKay's criteria for reference are unrefined, and they do not quite capture what is required for reference. Specifically, understanding on the part of the listeners is irrelevant to determining the object of reference and whether the speaker succeeded in referring. Further, the *o.r.e.* used needn't do all the work, as long as it is apparent given the context what is being referred to. MacKay certainly got some things right in his analysis of the issue, but he was held back by his attachment to "terminological legislation" (MacKay 198), which, although it may not have been arbitrary, was certainly misled.

Works Cited

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