

Referential Descriptions and Communication

Jim Hutchinson
University of Toronto

Abstract:

In this paper, I discuss Saul Kripke's objections to Donnellan's understanding of referential descriptions, which is set out in "Reference and Definite Descriptions". Kripke's objections are seen to only have weight in the absence of a principled reason to think that Donnellan is correct in his view (which is that descriptions used referentially differ in semantic content from those used attributively). I then show that there are indeed principled reasons, deriving from considerations about communication, that show that Donnellan must be right.

In his paper 'Reference and Definite Descriptions'¹, Keith Donnellan identifies two distinct uses of definite descriptions: those he calls 'referential' and those he calls 'attributive'. He believes that a single definite description can be used in these distinct ways because it makes different contributions to the propositions expressed (has different 'semantic content') in different contexts. Saul Kripke, in his 'Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference', argues that though Donnellan is right that descriptions can be used in two different ways, it can and should be explained without appeal to differences in semantic content. In this paper, I will first explain the distinction between the two uses, and present Donnellan's evidence for his view. I will then present Kripke's reasons for disagreeing with him about how this evidence is to be explained. Given some plausible premises about communication, I will show that Kripke's view cannot be right--descriptions used referentially and those used attributively must differ in semantic content. Lastly, I will briefly point to two important questions that this paper must leave unanswered.

Section I

Donnellan's distinction is as follows. An attributive use of the definite description 'The ' in 'The ' is F' is one in which we intend to state that whatever object satisfies 'The ' is F. A referential use is one in which we intend to state of a specific object that it is F, regardless of whether it satisfies 'the ' or not. Consider the following case:

At a party, S spies a man she knows to be very boring drinking what appears to be a martini. S says to H, 'The man drinking the martini is boring'. H sees the man with the martini glass, and forms the belief that he is boring. In fact, the man had only water in his martini glass.

In this case, S has used the description referentially--she had a particular individual in mind, and meant to talk about him, no matter what was in his glass. Her communicative intentions have also been satisfied--H has formed a belief about the right man. This is the phenomenon Donnellan notices: when we use descriptions referentially, we can achieve our intentions in making the utterance even if the intended object is not the satisfier of the description. This is also true of non-assertoric sentences involving definite descriptions used referentially--when we ask questions and make commands, our intended questions can be answered and our intended commands obeyed. This ambiguity is meant to be pragmatic--features of the context, especially our intentions, determine how we are using our descriptions.

¹ pp 247-259 of *The Philosophy of Language*. Martinich ed, 2001. New York, Oxford University Press

Beyond this, Donnellan does not tell us what is required for us to be in a position to use descriptions referentially. This is the first question to which I will turn at the end of this paper.

Donnellan thinks that these facts about what we can do with our utterances are explained by our descriptions' making different contributions to the proposition expressed, and thus having different truth conditions. He does not, however, provide a principled reason for thinking that the differences in the properties of our descriptions are to be explained by semantic content--he simply states that the truth conditions of the two utterances are different. In addition to this intuition, he is implicitly appealing to principles which connect the epistemic and inferential properties of our descriptions with the semantic content--but in the absence of an explicit argument, it is all too easy to dismiss Donnellan's evidence. He also does not say anything about what he thinks the semantic content of descriptions used referentially is. This is the second question to which I will turn at the end of this paper.

Section II

In 'Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference'², dismiss Donnellan's evidence is exactly what Kripke does. In presenting Donnellan's case, Kripke explains the distinction and then attributes to Donnellan a 'substantial intuition' that in cases of descriptions used referentially in which the intended referent does not satisfy the description, the speaker has still said something true of the intended referent. This intuition is all he cites in favour of Donnellan's conclusion.

He makes a distinction, which I will adopt, between a speaker's general and specific intentions in making an utterance³. For any designator (word or phrase which picks out an object), there is an intention to use it the same way each time to pick out an object. This object is the one that fulfils the conditions for being the referent of the designator. For example, whenever I use the phrase 'the present Prime Minister of Canada', I have an intention to pick out whatever object is the current Prime Minister of Canada, conditions fulfilled currently by Stephen Harper. This intention Kripke calls the general intention. The object, I will call the object of our general intention. The conditions for being the object of our general intention in uttering a designator can be specified independently of context of utterance, though the object it picks out may change with context. Sometimes, however, accompanying this intention,

² pp 225-256 of *Definite Descriptions: a Reader*. Ostertag, Gary ed. 1998 Bradford, MIT Press.

³ *Ibid*, 238.

a speaker has an intention to talk about a particular object the speaker has in mind. This is the specific intention. Often, a speaker's specific and general intentions in making an utterance will coincide, and pick out the same object. Sometimes, however, the object of the specific intention is not the object of the general intention. For example, in the case mentioned in the last section, S has a general intention to use the description 'the man drinking the martini' to pick out the unique man drinking a martini. She has a specific intention to pick out a particular man, however, regardless of whether he is drinking a martini or not. In this case, he is not--so the intentions have diverged.

With this in place, we can now say: Donnellan thinks that sometimes when we use a description and our specific and general intentions diverge, the referent of the description is the object of our specific intention, rather than our general intention. Kripke disagrees, and thinks that the referent of the description is always the object of the general intention.

He offers the following methodological reasons for thinking that the object picked out by our designators should always be that of our general intention.

1) 'Considerations of economy'. We should not postulate ambiguities and senses beyond what is necessary.

2) The phenomenon Donnellan discusses is not limited to descriptions. Something very similar can happen with proper names. Suppose S sees someone on Jones' lawn who appears to be doing something interesting. S asks, 'What is Jones doing?'. A hearer, H responds: 'Raking the leaves'. It may be true the the man on the lawn is raking the leaves, and this is what S wanted to know--thus, her question has been answered. However, the man on the lawn is not Jones--it is Smith. In this case, says Kripke, we would not explain the fact that S's question has been answered by appealing to an ambiguity in the name 'Jones'. Rather, we would explain it in another way--such as Grice's theory of implicature. Since this is essentially the same phenomenon, it would be puzzling if we explained it differently in the case of descriptions--since Grice's theory could explain this case as well.

3) We can expect ambiguities to be disambiguated in other languages. However, we would not expect to find the referential/attributive ambiguity disambiguated. This is a reason to think there is no ambiguity in our descriptions.

For these reasons, Kripke favours the view that the semantic content of descriptions used referentially and attributively is exactly the same, and the object contributed to the truth conditions of the utterance is the satisfier of the description in all cases.

The facts that Donnellan points out are to be explained in another way--Kripke points to Grice's theory. The notion of specific intention accounts for Donnellan's 'intuition' that something true has been said.

If all that Donnellan had to motivate his view was this intuition, then these considerations would indeed tell in favour of Kripke's view. If however, if there is a principled reason to think that the semantic content of descriptions used attributively differs from that of the same description used referentially, then Kripke's methodological points will not have any force. It is not clear how we are supposed to follow the prescription of 1), since we do not know how many senses are 'necessary', nor is it clear that 3) is true of all ambiguities, especially of pragmatic ambiguities. Kripke's point 2), however, deserves some consideration. I will return to it in section IV. First, however, we will see that there is such a principled reason for thinking that Donnellan is right.

Section III

Given some claims about the relation of semantic content to communication, the claim that the semantic content of definite descriptions is the same whether they are used referentially or attributively reduces to absurdity. Suppose we accept the following principles, suggested by Richard Heck in his paper 'The Sense of Communication'⁴,

governing what it is for a hearer, H, to understand an utterance, u, made by a speaker S:

- 1) S succeeds in communicating with H by way of u if and only if H understands u.
- 2) H understands u if and only if H knows what is said by u. I adopt the following general account of semantic content:
- 3) What is said by an utterance is its semantic content.

These three entail that when and only when H understands the semantic content of u (the proposition u expresses), S has succeeded in communicating. Now consider Kripke's view of descriptoins:

K) Any utterance containing a definite description will have as semantic content a proposition about the object which satisfies the description, and contribute that object to the truth conditions of the utterance.

Consider the following case:

C1) At a party, S spies a man she knows to be very boring drinking what appears to be a martini. S says to H, 'The man drinking the martini is boring'. In fact, the man had only water in his martini glass. H has recently had a fascinating conversation with a man who is in fact the unique man at the party drinking a martini. Remembering this, H remarks, 'Oh, I found him to be quite interesting!'

In C1), communication has obviously failed. This is intuitively clear, as well as being supported by a consideration of why we are interested in successful communication. We wish to communicate successfully, to understand one another, so that we can transmit beliefs, knowledge, and achieve reactions in others. When we make an utterance intending to do these things, and communication is successful, hearers are in a position to form the appropriate beliefs, etc. In case C1), H will form the wrong beliefs, take the wrong actions, and not understand the actions of S. For this reason, communication has failed here.

If we accept K), the sentence uttered by S expresses a proposition about the actual man drinking the martini. In C1) H certainly seems to have grasped that proposition (the details of which depend on what we think propositions are).

Supposing she has, 1), 2), and 3) entail that communication has succeeded. However, as we have just seen, it has in fact failed. Hence, one of our premises is false.

If we are committed to K), we ask: can any of 1), 2), and 3) be doubted? I see no way to deny 2) and 3)--they are essentially definitions. 1) however, is the best place to object. I will consider some possible objections that a supporter of K) might make.

It seems communication has failed in C1) because the speaker made a mistake. We might place stricter requirements on speakers, and replace 1) with 1*):

1*) S succeeds in communicating with H by way of u if and only if S's specific and general intentions in uttering u coincide, and H understands u.

This will not count anything as successful communication that 1) does not, and will thus avoid counterexamples like C1). However, it is too strong. Showing us this is the value of Donnellan's 'Reference and Definite Descriptions'--it is exactly his point. Communication can still succeed when our general and specific intentions come apart. Consider:

C2) At a party, S spies a man she knows to be very boring drinking what appears to be a martini. S says to H, 'The man drinking the martini is boring'. H sees the man with the martini glass, forms the belief that he is boring, and resolves to avoid that man. In fact, the man had only water in a martini glass.

Just as clearly as communication must have failed in C1), it can succeed in C2)5. Just as what is important about communication did not obtain in C1), it can obtain in C2). Though S's general and specific intentions have diverged, H has attained at least a belief, and perhaps knowledge, that a certain man is boring. H will take the intended action and avoid the man. 1*) is too strong a requirement, since it holds that C2 must be a case of communication failure, when there is no reason to think that it has not succeeded.

A second possible modification of 1) suggests itself. This is, I believe, what Kripke, or anyone serious about using Grice's theory to explain the case of descriptions used referentially would wish to say:

S succeeds in communicating with H by way of u if and only if H accesses the proposition intended by S(a proposition about the object of S's specific intention),

5 I say can, because of concerns arising from Heck's paper--to ensure that communication is successful we have to know what the semantic content grasped by the hearer is, and we have not specified yet what the content is.

either by understanding *u*, or by performing a Gricean derivation of the intended proposition from the one expressed.

To understand the proposal, we need to say a little about what Gricean derivation is. Grice believes that there are certain maxims governing conversation, based on the very general rule, called the cooperative principle, that we should not say things which do not make sense given the conversation⁶. If a speaker makes an utterance which expresses a proposition that is not in accordance with these maxims, those who hear the utterance realize that something has gone wrong. In this case, hearers can, given the proposition expressed, access other propositions by a particular mode of reasoning called a 'Gricean derivation'. The details of this procedure are not important here, but the maxims whose violations cause a hearer to begin deriving other propositions are. The relevant maxims which must be satisfied by a proposition expressed by an utterance are:

Quality: Do not say that for which you lack evidence.

Relation: Be relevant.

Manner: Be brief and orderly, avoiding ambiguity and obscurity.

Quantity: Be as informative as required by the current exchange, and not more informative.

So, the Gricean apparatus explains how it is that a hearer accesses a different proposition than the one that is expressed by an utterance when and only when the hearer thinks that an utterance violates one or more of these maxims, and derives another proposition.

This proposal rightly counts C1) as an unsuccessful, because the intended proposition was not the one expressed by *u*, and H did not derive the intended one either.

Let us consider how this proposal will analyse C2), assuming K. S does have evidence that there is a man drinking a martini, and that he is boring; thus, the maxim of Quality is adhered to. Referring to the intended man makes sense given the context of the conversation; thus, Relation is adhered to. The utterance is perfectly unambiguous and brief; thus Manner is adhered to. Quantity remains. It certainly

⁶ see 'Logic and Conversation', 165-175 of *The Philosophy of Language*. Martinich ed, 2001. New York, Oxford University Press

seems that S has given the proper amount of information--just enough to identify someone in a crowded room.

The Gricean, however, can make a case that the maxim of Quantity is being violated, and that the speaker will recognize this. In this circumstance, the description is, strictly speaking, more informative than is required. When the intended referent is right in front of S and H, a simple demonstrative would do. If this is right, even though H believes that the description is true of the man in question, she still, finding that the maxim of quantity is being violated, will do a Gricean derivation of a different proposition--presumably a proposition with the semantic content of a demonstrative in place of that of the description (i.e. 'That is boring'). Given that the S, in uttering *u*, intended the demonstrative proposition, and H derived it, the Gricean who holds 1**) can account for the fact that in C2), communication has succeeded, while still adhering to K).

Whether this is plausible or not, there are cases of descriptions used referentially in which the object of the speaker's specific intention does not satisfy the description, and communication succeeds, though all the maxims are satisfied, so H will have no reason to perform a Gricean derivation. Consider one final case:

C3) At a party, S spies a man she knows to be very boring drinking what appears to be a martini, who promptly goes into a different room. S says to H, 'The man drinking the martini in the next room is a bore'. Later, H enters the room, and, spying the man who appears to be drinking a martini, resolves to avoid that man. In fact, the man had only water in a martini glass. There was in fact a unique martini drinker in the room, but H did not see him.

Just as in the last case, the Maxims of Quality, Manner, and Relevance are satisfied. But in this case, the maxim of Quantity is satisfied too--there is no other, simpler way for S to pick out the intended object. S is no longer in a position to use a demonstrative to refer to the man. Thus, the maxim of Quantity is adhered to, and H will have no reason to perform a Gricean derivation of a different proposition. However, just as before, communication can be successful in this case. But, supposing K is true, the intended proposition is not the semantic content *u*, and no Gricean derivation of another proposition has taken place. Thus, 1**) cannot count this as a case of successful communication.

The only route I see open to a Gricean about referential descriptions is to claim that even here, the maxim of Quantity is being violated. Any information is too much

information--what S really intends to express is a something like a singular proposition. Recognizing this, a hearer will perform a Gricean derivation of this proposition.

This would be an odd view. It would be a view in which the maxims are no longer really governing conversation--in C3) S could not, in talk, pick out the intended object except by some description. Thus, anything S says would violate the maxim of Quantity--even if the description chosen were true. This seems absurd--obviously there is nothing wrong with S's utterance, especially not if the intended man actually did satisfy the description (and remember, H thinks he does, so finds nothing amiss with the utterance). Grice himself expresses doubt about the second part of the maxim of Quantity, 'Do not be more informative than is required'. He says, 'It might be said that to be overinformative is not a transgression of the Cooperative Principle but merely a waste of time.'⁷ At any rate, I think the view that in many cases we really intend singular propositions, and accessing that proposition is what is required for communication is ultimately unstable, largely because of considerations arising in the above mentioned paper of Richard Heck's--but it requires a full exploration of the proposal, which I cannot go into here.

Assuming this move is unacceptable, however, 1**) will not do as a replacement of 1) if we wish to maintain K).

I can think of no other plausible modifications of 1) which are compatible with 2), 3), and K). In the absence of any other proposals, we should accept 1) as an account of communication, and reject K), as it leads to absurdities.

Section IV

In the fact that successful communication occurs when and only when the semantic content of an utterance is grasped by the hearer, we have the missing link between Donnellan's evidence, which is evidence of successful communication, and semantic content. Sometimes, when we use descriptions referentially, the description must contribute the object of our specific intention to the truth conditions of the utterance, and must contribute something which determines that object as semantic content. With this in place, Kripke's first and third methodological consideration no longer need concern us. However, as stated above, his second objection suggests something interesting.

The phenomeon Donnellan has noticed is not limited to descriptions. As Kripke points out, something very similar can occur with proper names. It would

be very puzzling, he says, if we were to explain the analogous phenomenon in the case of descriptions in an entirely different way--and he is right. I believe that the analogous case of proper names should be treated in the same way as that of referential descriptions. For the same considerations about semantic content and communication serve to show that even proper names cannot always have the same semantic content--analogous arguments to those given above would show that there is a 'referential' use of names as well. Just as we can communicate successfully about 'the man drinking the martini', even if our intended referent is not drinking a martini, we can communicate about 'Jones' in the distance, even if the man does not meet the criteria associated with the name 'Jones' (the criteria to be supplied by whatever theory of names we adopt).

Section V

With it established that there is a referential use of descriptions which must differ in semantic content from the attributive use, I would like to highlight, before closing, the two important questions mentioned earlier, and point in what I believe is the right direction for answering them. These are:

Q1) What relation must hold between a speaker S and an object o which permits S to use a description, 'The F', to refer to o whether or not o satisfies 'The F'?

Q2) What is the semantic content of such a description?

It seems to me that Gareth Evans' notion of a type of situation apt for producing knowledge that something is the F is at work when we use descriptions referentially, and thus might hold and answer to these questions. In the 'martini' cases discussed, it is crucial that the speaker S is in a situation which would often produce knowledge that a man is drinking a martini--namely, seeing a man drinking from a martini glass. It also seems that providing an account of the semantic content of utterances involving referential descriptions, which must determine which object will be referent, could need this notion, or something like it, to explain how the right object is picked out

each time. Of course, much more must be said about Q1) and Q2) than I can go into here.

At any rate, the considerations in this paper have shown that these remaining questions must have answers, for they have shown that Donnellan was right in his explanation of how referential descriptions do what they do.