

How Often Do We Use a Definite Description to Talk About its Semantic Referent?



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Abstract

In this paper I respond to the objections put forth by Krešimir Agbaba (this volume: *Kriterion* (2009) 22: 1-6) against my earlier paper (*Kriterion* (2006) 20: 7-13) in which I argue that given Donnellan's formulation—as well as Kripke's and Salmon's generalized accounts—an attributive use of a definite description is a very rare linguistic phenomenon.

In using a definite description a speaker may wish to talk about a particular object he has in mind, or he may wish to talk about whatever or whoever fits that description; Donnellan called the former a “referential” and the latter an “attributive use” [2]. Obviously not every use of a definite description would fit one or the other category and Donnellan was the first to admit that the distinction is not supposed to be exhaustive. Clearly there are contexts in which a speaker could use a definite description neither referentially nor attributively. No author who has written on the topic has been much bothered by such cases, and the common tendency in the literature has been to take these as exceptional uses that do not carry too much theoretical significance. Recently I argued that this is not the case [4]. I did not make an issue of the referential use; it seems quite clear to me that we use definite descriptions referentially quite frequently, and it may well be the case that this is the most common way of usage; my problem had to do with the so-called “attributive” use which Donnellan initially described as a use in which a speaker “wishes to assert something about whatever or whoever fits that description.” [2, p. 285]. Later Kripke identified this with an intention to refer to the “semantic referent” of the definite description [6, p. 173-174]. But Donnellan was not too strict about his own criterion, and did allow for “near miss” cases in which a speaker intends to refer to an object which does not exactly fit the description, but it is “close enough” to count as an attributive use. In effect only in the referential use can one “miss by a mile” according to Donnellan [3, p. 210].

Now I argued that there are clear cases in which a speaker in using a definite description may have an intention to talk about something which he or she does not have in mind in the appropriate sense, thus ruling out it being a case of a referential use, though the speaker clearly does not wish to talk about whatever exactly fits the description nor something close enough to it to make it a near miss [4]. As I argued uses of definite descriptions are not always this neat, and we speakers may have a complicated network of intentions concerning the different parts of a definite description in a particular use of it. To make my point I specifically concentrated on a use of a complex definite description that has a very strong attributive flavor, though a part of the description is being used referentially. Take a complex definite description (i.e. one that has another singular term embedded in it) in the form “the *F* which is the *G*”, and suppose that a speaker in using the (larger) description has no specific object in mind, in Donnellan’s sense, ruling out the use of being referential; but then we may further suppose that the speaker in using the embedded description “the *G*” intends to refer to an object, which he has in mind, and which he takes to be the *G*, making the use of the embedded description “the *G*” by the speaker a referential use. Now what ought to be said about the speaker’s use of the larger description “the *F* which is the *G*”? Such uses of definite descriptions seem to be left out of the picture by Donnellan’s [2] own formulation, as well as Kripke’s [6] and Salmon’s [7] generalized accounts. Though this was my main focus, I also talked about a couple of other problematic cases.

In a recent objection, Krešimir Agbaba [1] argues that the examples I provide which I claim to be problematic are in fact nothing but attributive uses of definite descriptions. Let’s look at these cases and Agbaba’s comments. In one of my examples (which is a modification of one of Donnellan’s own stories), a man visits a tribe wishing to meet with someone by referring to him as “the king” who in fact is a usurper. In this case the speaker does not know who this person is, in the appropriate sense, and therefore is not using the term “the king” referentially, nor does he wish to assert something about the actual king. Though the use of the description appears to have an attributive flavor to it, quite clearly the speaker has not merely scored a near miss and is totally off track. Now curiously enough regarding this case Agbaba says, “I do not see what would count as a wild miss” [1, p. 3]. If there is an actual king, and the man the visitor wishes to talk about is in fact a usurper, then it seems obvious to me that trying to pick him out by the term “the king” is a wild miss. Surely we could find a uniquely identify-

ing attribute that would pick out that man our speaker wishes to meet. Perhaps, “the usurper whom you guys believe to be your king” would do the job; but the whole point is that our speaker does not use such an expression. His words simply do not capture his intent, though they may enable his audience to pick out the right person in this context. It is a simple fact that our speaker in using the term “the king” does not wish to talk about the king, making it impossible to consider it as being an attributive use.

In another case (which again I derived by modifying and extending one of Donnellan’s own examples) an investigator uses the definite description “the gun that killed Smith’s murderer” (when Jones, who was on trial for murdering Smith, is killed by a gunshot), wishing to assert something about the gun that killed Jones. Now let’s suppose that Jones is in fact not Smith’s murderer, but our investigator still wishes to assert something about the gun that killed Jones. Again here there appears to be a wild miss, for the actual term that our speaker uses, namely “the gun that killed Smith’s murderer”, by no means picks out the gun he wishes to talk about, and it is not even close. Now regarding this case Agbaba has the following to say:

“The investigator most surely doesn’t refer to a specific gun he has in mind (it is not in his empirical field), but rather correlates the *gun’s attribute* by which Smith’s murderer got killed. More precisely, the investigator ‘refers’ to the attribute of ‘not being found’. This is clearly asserting something about whatever fits the description” [1, p. 3].

Fits which description? Surely not: “the gun that killed Smith’s murderer”. Indeed there is another description that would pick out the right gun, namely “the gun that killed Jones”, but that is not the one that the speaker used. Agbaba may wish to insist that as long as there is such a description that picks out the right object, even if it is not the one that the speaker in fact used, that is good enough to make his use an attributive one; then I do not see how that will also not be true of the referential use. For any referential use we could always find a definite description that semantically picks out the object the speaker wishes to talk about. For instance if the speaker uses “Smith’s murderer” referentially to refer to a man, we could always substitute “the man I have in mind whom I take to be Smith’s murderer” to do the job. Is that going to make the use of “Smith’s murderer” an attributive use? Surely not.

What is quite puzzling for me is that as I understand Agbaba seems

to think that when we use a definite description attributively we do not in fact pick out the object in virtue of it fitting the description:

“The definite description in its attributive function is not structured in the way that it alone points to some definite object that fits the description – namely, the uttered expression (containing the description in attributive use), doesn’t give us the requisite elements for the objects identification. Therefore, it doesn’t enable the identification, but merely ascribes a certain attribute” [1, p. 4].

I must admit that if an attributive use is not good for identifying an object, then I do not see how we can even make sense of Donnellan’s formulation which explicates an attributive use as one in which the speaker wishes to assert something about what fits the description. Even Russell himself who held that ordinary definite descriptions are not singular terms did countenance a certain denotation relation between a definite description and an object.

Finally my last and perhaps most important point was that when a speaker uses a definite description referentially to refer to an object he has in mind, even when that object is the semantic referent of the description, it still is not the case that the speaker’s *primary* intention is to refer to the semantic referent of the description. So the cases that I find problematic are not cases in which there are wild misses; rather they are simply ordinary cases which contain no error and, cases in which, to use Kripke’s terminology, semantic reference and speaker’s reference totally overlap. So then we come to the result that using a definite description with the primary intention of referring to the semantic referent is a rare linguistic phenomenon. This I take to be a claim about the pragmatics of the use of a definite description, rather than the semantics of what a definite description expresses or refers to in a sentence.

Let us remember that Kripke [6] accused Donnellan of confusing semantics with pragmatics; he argued that Russell’s theory of descriptions, or any other semantic theory, attempts to give a semantic analysis of a sentence. So unless we take the referential/attributional distinction to have a semantic significance, it has no bearing on Russell’s theory. Given that the distinction does not amount to a semantic ambiguity between a referential and an attributive use, says Kripke, it cannot be used to refute any semantic theory. I side with Kripke here, but it appears Agbaba has not been convinced by Kripke’s argument. That is why, it seems, he criticizes my view that an attributive use of a definite description is an extremely rare linguistic phenomenon:

“Furthermore I must confess that I don’t see why would attributive uses be an “extremely rare linguistic phenomenon” in our everyday discourse. In a Russellian interpretation (which acknowledges only attributive uses) definite descriptions play a role of expressing “object-independent propositions”, unlike proper names that express “object-dependent propositions” [4]. They are perfectly natural and standard elements of our language” [1, p. 5].

As I side with Kripke on this issue, and take the referential/attributive distinction to be predominantly a pragmatic one, I think it would be a mistake to claim that Russell’s theory gives an account of one and not the other. Russell’s theory gives a semantic analysis of a definite description that occurs in a sentence; it has nothing to say about what intentions the speaker may or may not have in using such an expression and what effect this has on what he or she may have referred to by this use. Russell’s theory must remain silent on this issue, for as Kripke forcibly argued it is not a pragmatic theory about the conditions for a speaker to refer, but rather it is a theory about the semantic function definite descriptions play in a sentence.¹

My basic point here has to do with pragmatics more than semantics, which is that it is rarely the primary intention of a speaker to assert something about the semantic referent of a definite description when used in an utterance; I am strongly inclined to think that this says something quite important about our use of language, and I fail to see how anything Agbaba says is incompatible with this basic claim. Furthermore Donnellan’s referential/attributive distinction should be reformulated to take this into account, if we wish it to shed light on how we in fact make use of definite descriptions.^{2 3}

¹Though I side with Kripke here, I am not sure whether Russell himself was that clear on whether he was doing semantics or pragmatics. Given his epistemology, and especially his theory of acquaintance, which in fact gave rise to his theory of descriptions, he held many theses which today we would consider to be in the realm of pragmatics. Nonetheless I still think that his theory of descriptions is a semantic theory and not a pragmatic one.

²On the other hand it seems to me that a lot of confusion in the literature has been caused by the fact there is more than one “referential/attributive” distinction and Donnellan was himself not clear on which one he had intended. See [5] for a detailed discussion of this.

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