



Reference and Misdescriptions

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# REFERENCE AND MISDESCRIPTONS

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## *Introduction*

We can individuate paradigmatic cases of referential expressions in proper names, such as «Dante Alighieri» and «Napoli». On many occasions, a name is the best tool we have to refer to a particular object, but it is clearly not the only one, nor is it always the best. On some occasions we may not know the name of something we want to refer to. In these cases, we may use an indexical like «you», or a demonstrative like «this» or «that», if the intended object is available for demonstration. Very often, we are not so lucky, and we are forced to search for the right words to describe something we want to refer to.

One of my purposes here is to focus on philosophers who treat definite descriptions (expressions such as «the kid talking on the phone») as referential expressions and outline their different approaches, which are essentially based on likening definite descriptions to (logically) proper names or demonstratives.<sup>1</sup> Depending on which expression is chosen as a model, the characterization of descriptions changes consequently: In the demonstrative model, reference by descriptions is based on satisfaction of a linguistically-mandated condition; in the proper name model, descriptive conditions and their satisfaction are irrelevant for the purpose of determining the referent. My aim is to propose an explanation of referential descriptions that cannot be reduced to any of the previously mentioned models but cries out for an independent account.

In what follows I outline Donnellan's famous characterization of referential uses of descriptions and compare some of his main points with the accounts of

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth, whenever I use «description» I mean *definite description*. Note, also, that in this article descriptions referring to a plurality of individuals (e.g., «the men crawling on the floor») are not dealt with.

other referentialists, namely Michael Devitt, Genoveva Marti and Joseph Almog.<sup>2</sup>

At the basis of the distinctions I go through, the discriminatory elements are conventional meaning and (referential) intention: I contend that the former is necessary for (some kind of) reference and, consequently, the latter is not sufficient for it. The peculiarity of my view is that it has meaning as a necessary condition for referential descriptions *and* it admits reference by misdescription, a description whose attribute is not satisfied by its referent. It might be objected that if this approach does not distinguish between satisfied and unsatisfied attributes, then the claim that *meaning is necessary* is empty. Taking my cue from Donnellan's work, I show that the antecedent of this conditional is false: we can see the difference between satisfied and unsatisfied attributes and take it into account. Even more importantly, we can discriminate among unsatisfied attributes and say that not all of them can be used for referring on a given occasion. I explain this phenomenon by binding reference to communication and social practices, and in the end I link my conclusions to a possible development of the theory of reference.

## I.

According to Donnellan (1966), descriptions may have two functions: an attributive function and a referential function. When used attributively, descriptions may work as Bertrand Russell (1905) says they do: As quantificational mechanisms which *denote* the unique object *satisfying the attribute* in the description, if there is one. With referential uses things are different: When used referentially, the description is «merely one tool for doing a certain job – calling attention to a person or a thing – and in general any other device for doing the same job, another description or a name, would do as well» (Donnellan 1966: 285). What matters, basically, is the object referred to, more than the path leading to it.<sup>3</sup>

Donnellan focused on how users of language behave in conversations. When they refer, speakers have a link to the referent and use an expression that is suitable for referring to it, but *which* one they use is not relevant: what matters is just to refer to *that* object. The source of the relation of reference is in the referent itself and in its connection with the speaker: words come in second place.

<sup>2</sup> Note that Devitt's view is similar to David Kaplan's in «Dthat » (Kaplan 1978). Devitt (1981; 2004) has insisted on the semantic relevance of referential descriptions by relating these expressions to demonstratives. Also Howard Wettstein made a similar claim in Wettstein 1981; 1983.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard Linsky (1963) made a similar point, although in a less systematic way.

Let me reconstruct the original example, displaying the difference between the two uses (Donnellan 1966: 285-286). Imagine a context where Smith has been brutally murdered and his body has been unnecessarily savaged. Faced with this miserable spectacle, someone – say Jacob – utters «Smith's murderer is insane ». It seems reasonable to say that Jacob was denoting Smith's insane murderer, *because of his being Smith's murderer*. The attribute is essential, here.

Let us develop the story: A man, Jones, goes on trial, accused of Smith's murder. Jones is the main suspect for Smith's death and he is, by nature, a little crazy; he is freaking out at the bar, when Jacob utters «Smith's murderer is insane ». Now, what Jacob is referring to is the particular insane man at the bar, no matter if he killed Smith or not, no matter if the description does fit him or not.

At the heart of the distinction, there is the idea that one may referentially use a description to speak about a specific particular which one is causally linked with. When using a description attributively, the speaker wishes to state something about whomever or whatever happens to satisfy the attribute in the description, whilst in the other case she has an individual in mind, and it is this individual she wants to say something about. This becomes clear if we consider that it is not even necessary – by Donnellan's lights – that the attribute be satisfied for there to be reference. That is to say, even if the referent is misdescribed, the speaker can actually refer to it with a description. We will return to this point.

Note, however, that in Donnellan's account, words keep the meaning they had before being used in a referential (mis)description: by referring to Jones with the words «Smith's murderer» Jacob is changing neither the meaning of «Smith», nor that of «murderer» (Donnellan 1968: 215). The truth of sentences in which a referential description occurs does not depend solely on the meaning of the words it contains: It depends on *the referent* having the properties ascribed to it by the predicate occurring in predicate position. To be clear, since Jacob in the courtroom refers to Jones, his statement is true iff *Jones* is insane; no matter if Smith's murderer, if there is one, were insane.<sup>4</sup>

The referent is seen as the source of the relation: the origin of the relation is in there being something out there. But what kind of relation is this? Russell's acquaintance, Kaplan's *en rapport*, some kind of causal-perceptual link, the notion may be stricter or broader, but the idea is more or less the same: the connection precedes the use of language. The world before the language, so to speak.

It is an insight of this kind that lies behind Donnellan's account of descriptions. When one uses a description attributively, one starts from a

<sup>4</sup> To argue for this, Donnellan (1978) appeals to an argument based on how anaphoric expressions behave. For an earlier version of the argument, see Chastain (1975).

linguistic expression with a conventional meaning and then searches for the object uniquely described by it. The relation is inside-out. The relation of reference would exploit a different form of connection between speaker and object. There is a particular object, such as an alleged killer freaking out at the bar, which I am paying attention to and then I use language to refer to it. The direction of the relation is inverted: It starts from the outside, from *the* object, and then goes to the speaker, from the outside-in.<sup>5</sup>

Donnellan's (1968; 1970) two *games of describing* are illuminating here. In the «attributive game», the describer gives some descriptions and the other players have to find an object that is *rightly described* by them. In the referential version, the describer picks out an object, and then tries to characterize it in such a way that the others will be able to find out what it is that she has described. The games are used by Donnellan to highlight the differences between referential use, where the speaker starts from the thing, and then tries to refer to it, and attributive use, where the speaker has descriptive material to start with and then looks for something to fit it. In a nutshell, in referential uses there is a *right thing* to pick out, the one the speaker has in mind (Donnellan 1966: 294, 303).

## II.

A natural question arises: Does reference by misdescription make the speaker a Humpty Dumpty, somebody who uses the language bending it at will? The question was posed for the first time by Alfred MacKay in his «Mr. Donnellan and Humpty Dumpty on Reference» (MacKay 1968).

Humpty Dumpty, talking to Alice, says «I have glory for you», where «glory» is intended by Humpty Dumpty to mean «a nice knockdown argument». MacKay's challenge to Donnellan is the following: If Jacob can refer to Jones by calling him «Smith's murderer», even though Jones is not Smith's murderer, what avoids the speaker becoming just like Humpty Dumpty? What prevents her from referring to whatever she wants to refer to by whatever means? In the end, what relevance does the attribute have in referential descriptions?

Donnellan replies to MacKay in «Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again» (Donnellan 1968). His answer consists in limiting the range of (mis)descriptions usable by speakers to refer. By Donnellan's lights, if my intention is to refer to an object, to do this I only use those descriptions that I believe will enable my audience to pick out the referent. So, Donnellan limits the range of misdescriptions by connecting it to referential intentions, while proposing that

<sup>5</sup> It is Paolo Leonardi whom I first heard of explaining the difference between attributive and referential uses in this way.

an intention has to be oriented towards its audience in order to be referential.<sup>6</sup> In section V I introduce his proposal with some more details and I restate it in a way that allows for reference failures, something that perhaps the original proposal would not have allowed for, as we shall see.

However, since the claim about misdescriptions is the more controversial in Donnellan's account, one could try dropping it and contend that it is not necessary for understanding the phenomenon of reference by description. In the following section, I present Michael Devitt's view on this issue, which retains the claim that descriptions have a referential use with semantic relevance, while discarding reference by misdescription. Other philosophers, whom I introduce in section IV, contend that the phenomenon of reference is not well explained if we give up reference by misdescription, because reference is essentially non-predicative.

My position can be seen as middle ground between Devitt and the theorists of reference without predication. I maintain that reference by misdescription has a semantic relevance (although I will not argue for this here) and try to preserve the intuitive idea that the predicative element in referentially used descriptions has a semantic role.

### III.

The most widespread criticism of referential accounts of descriptions is based on the idea that referential uses of these expressions do not have any semantic import. Commonly, since Kripke, it has been argued that the semantic referent of the description used by Jacob in the courtroom (i.e., «Smith's murderer») is the person satisfying the attribute in the description – if there is one and whoever she is – although it may be pragmatically conveyed that Jones is insane (Kripke 1977). According to Kripke's followers (e.g., Kent Bach) referential uses of descriptions come later, after the literal quantificational meaning is in place (Bach 2004).

On the contrary, Devitt argues that there are two kinds of conventional and literal meanings: one is the quantificational one mentioned above, the other is the referential one. On the one hand, attributive uses denote via existential quantification: The denoted object is the one uniquely satisfying the predicate in

<sup>6</sup> Not everybody agrees. We shall see in section V that one might have a conception of reference by description completely irrespective of the predicative element in the description, and it might be argued that Donnellan had this conception too. If this is true, then the limitation just mentioned would concern only communicative intentions and not referential intentions. That is to say that the limitation of the range of descriptions would be necessary for the purpose of communicating what the referent is, for letting the *audience* individuate it, but the limitation would be irrelevant for fixing the reference, for determining it.

the description, if there is one. On the other hand, three facts characterize referential meanings and speak in their favor: a) speakers regularly use descriptions to designate particulars, and this regularity supports the claim that referential meanings are conventional; b) it is a necessary condition for referential descriptions that the attribute be satisfied, and this makes referential meanings literal; c) speakers have a causal connection with the intended referent and, by means of this relation, they do not need to go through quantificational meaning to refer to it.<sup>7</sup>

One of Devitt's preferred arguments in favor of these points is the one from incomplete descriptions, definite descriptions designating an object not uniquely satisfying the attribute in the description (e.g., «the table»). «The table», if treated as a phrase having a quantificational mechanism denoting a *unique* table, as the Russellian treatment of definite descriptions would require, will hardly refer to the table one wants to refer to, for the simple reason that no object is uniquely a table. Russellians may reply in various ways to this argument, and a long debate may follow. Here, however, I am interested in Devitt's own explanation of the phenomenon.

When the speaker comes to use «the table» to refer to a table, she already has a link with it, a perceptual link, for example. It is via this causal chain that goes from the object to the speaker that the phrase «the table» refers to that specific piece of furniture, given that the intended referent actually satisfies the attribute in the description. So, when used referentially, the meaning of «the table» is not *whatever* table comes to be denoted by the description, «the table» refers to a specific table. In short, the opposition relevant for Devitt's point is: Quantificational meaning as «first meaning» vs. referential *meaning*, dependent on a semantic convention.

But, in one respect, Devitt is in accordance with Bach and disagrees with Donnellan. According to Devitt, for descriptions to successfully refer, it is necessary for the attribute in them to be satisfied. He is with Bach in asking for a «satisfactional» meaning, though referential and not posterior to the quantificational one.

Referential descriptions – he argues – behave similarly to demonstratives, along the lines of Kaplan's treatment of these expressions (see Kaplan 1989).<sup>8</sup> Demonstratives, in Kaplan's account, are associated with a semantic rule that picks out an individual in the context in which they are used. In a similar way,

<sup>7</sup> In fact, maybe it is not enough to say that descriptions are regularly used to refer to particulars to conclude that there is a semantic convention supporting these uses. What is needed is a clear explanation of what a semantic convention is.

<sup>8</sup> Note, however, that Kaplan would probably allow for the possibility that a complex demonstrative refers even if the predicate in it is not satisfied.

when descriptions are used referentially and their attribute is satisfied, the individual bearing the relevant causal connection with the speaker is picked out.

Before moving on to demonstratives, let us say a few words on indexicals, whose treatment is similar to that reserved for demonstratives, but easier. According to Kaplan, an indexical (e.g., «today») possesses a fixed *character* (a function from contexts to contents, which puts the day of the context in the content), and a variable *content* which changes as the context of use changes. To speak about today I have to use «today» today and «yesterday» tomorrow.

Demonstratives (e.g., «this») require more complicated treatment, since they do not have characters which univocally determine their content: it is clear that in most cases there is not just one near thing that is liable to be *this*. Demonstratives need *demonstrations*. But on some occasions even the demonstration is not sufficient to refer via a demonstrative. If, for example, I demonstrate an object by pointing at it with my finger, there might be many objects liable to be pointed at. In these cases, it is argued that speakers' intentions – more than demonstrations – allow them to refer to the particular, while speakers are connected to the referent via a causal link.<sup>9</sup>

In this regard, referential descriptions would behave similarly to complex demonstratives (e.g., «that table»). Like demonstratives, referential descriptions are used to speak about particulars, and the convention ruling these uses is semantic all the way down. Moreover, Devitt argues that his account not only says *that* there are referential meanings but also says *why* this is so, namely because of causal chains connecting speakers and referents.

To sum up, Devitt agrees with Donnellan about the semantic relevance of referential uses, which are explained by means of the causal connections between speakers and referents. But he is convinced, in contrast to Donnellan, that this connection, to be semantically relevant, has to be exploited in conjunction with attribute satisfaction.

#### IV.

We continue our investigation of the referentialist side considering two philosophers who maintain, in their own different ways, that reference by misdescription is possible. In Devitt's reading of reference, descriptions are put on a par with demonstratives; Genoveva Marti and Joseph Almog, instead, liken

<sup>9</sup> In fact, objections have been made to some of the latter remarks. It is possible to defend an account of demonstratives according to which neither demonstration nor intention are necessary in order to refer, if the referent is the most salient object in the context of use. However, even if intention is not necessary, a causal link continues to be necessary. Wettstein 1984 defends this view.



referential descriptions – in one respect, at least – to logically proper names.<sup>10</sup> As happens with logically proper names, in their accounts referential descriptions do not need to have their attribute satisfied to accomplish reference. Referential descriptions, they argue, *directly refer* to their referent, where «directly» indicates that no sense *à la* Frege determines which particular is the referent.<sup>11</sup> To say it with Marti, a referential description is not associated with a «search mechanism».

Marti's and Almog's conclusions on this point are the same, although their reasons for drawing them are profoundly different and so, consequently, are the sense and the extent of their claims. According to Almog, what matters in referential uses (of descriptions or of any linguistic phrase used to refer) is that speakers have a given particular in mind, with which they are causally related. According to Marti, what matters in these uses is the intention to *use language* in a peculiar way: words are unconventionally used, as purportedly happens in first uses of names.

The model for the latter view is the Kaplan of *Demonstratives* (1989):

According to the causal chain or chain of communication theory, there are two critical intentions associated with the use of a proper name word. One is the intention to use the word with the meaning given it by the person from whom you learned the word. The other is the contrary intention to create (and perhaps simultaneously use) a proper name word to refer to a given object irrespective of any prior meanings associated with the expression chosen as a vehicle.

In «Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice,» appendix IX, I introduce the notion of a *dubbing* for what I took to be the standard form of introduction of a proper name. [...] What I actually had in mind was a use of a proper name word with the second intention: the intention to originate a word rather than to conform to a prior usage. [...] I believe that my notion here is closely related to Donnellan's notion of a *referential use* of a definite description. Donnellan's distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions is easily and naturally extended to referential and attributive uses of proper names. When the intention to conform to a preestablished convention is absent we have the pure referential use. In this case, when a proper name is in question, I take it that an internal subjective dubbing has occurred. When a definite description is in question, again the speaker does not intend to give the expression its conventional meaning although he may intend to *make use* of the conventional meaning in conveying who it is that

<sup>10</sup> Almog 2004 and private conversation, Marti 2008. Donnellan himself compares referential descriptions to logically proper names (see Donnellan 1966: 282, 302-303).

<sup>11</sup> Marti (2008: 46) presents her view on referential descriptions as a conditional claim: if descriptions can be used to refer directly, then they can refer even if the descriptive condition is not satisfied.

is being referred to or for some other purpose associated with the act of utterance [...] What is important here is that the speaker intends to be creating a meaning for the expression in question rather than following conventions. Dubbings, whether aimed at introducing a relatively permanent sense for the expression or only aimed at attaching a nonce-sense to the expression, are unconventional uses of language. Dubbings create words. (Kaplan 1989: 559-561).

Kaplan explains his account of proper names by relating it to Donnellan's referential uses of descriptions; Marti's path is the other way round: from names to descriptions. The characteristic mark of the *first use* of a proper name is its unconventionality, its being «irrespective of any prior meanings associated with the expression chosen as a vehicle». For the purpose of illustrating the point, Marti uses the famous example of «Dartmouth».<sup>12</sup>

Dartmouth is a small town in the county of Devon, at the mouth of the river Dart. Certainly, when the name was introduced, geographical facts had some relevance in making the city-name bestowers *choose* the name «Dartmouth», but do these facts have any relevance in determining that the town is the referent of the name? Clearly, the answer is no. As Marti points out:

the naming ceremony can succeed even if the original name-bestowers are confused, even if the city was, in fact, miles inland and somewhere near a small lake that was not even named «Dart». The attributes are exploited in the establishment of the referential link. Their function is not to determine the referent. (Marti 2008: 51).

Marti focuses on the fact that to establish a convention for a name, first a dubbing must take place, a sort of labeling which is not itself grounded on a convention. She argues that the same kind of phenomenon is the one accounted for by Donnellan's insights on referential uses of descriptions. For what concerns dubbings, (pure) referential uses, what we refer with are not even words, until they are *created* by our use. Therefore referential descriptions are not constrained – for purposes of determining reference – by attributes occurring in them.

Almog, on the other hand, accounts for referential uses in a different way. He focuses on the fact that speakers have the referent in mind and that to think of that particular it is not necessary for it to satisfy an attribute. Then, he argues,

<sup>12</sup> The example was first given by J.S. Mill and become famous after Kripke used it and amplified its consequences in *Naming and Necessity* (Kripke 1980: 26). In fact, the case is not conclusive against attributive conceptions of proper names: It is possible to argue that the «Dartmouth» reference *is* determined by an attribute (whatever it may be), although it is not the attribute of being located at the mouth of the river Dart. Nonetheless, the case continues to have much persuasive force.

whatever expression speakers may use to refer, they will refer to the object they have in mind. In his view reference is a two-stage action: Firstly, the subject comes into causal connection with an individual and, by means of this link, she comes to have the individual in mind; secondly, she tries to communicate what she has in mind. For what concerns reference determination, everything happens at the first stage, whereas the latter only has to do with its *communication*, which may be happily accomplished, or not.

In Almog's view, referential uses are grounded on the *source* of the relation between subject and object. The subject is in a situation where she comes to be causally connected with an object – by perception, in the simplest case. Then this relation *alone* binds her and limits her possibilities to refer to the object: What is needed to refer is the cognitive state of the subject causally determined by the source object. This cognitive link is independent of what comes later: It is a non attributive and *non linguistic* natural relation which precedes the communication of reference. Notably, when we come to the communication of the determined referent, words are used in a conventional and traditional fashion.

Neither of these views allows for the possibility of reference *determination* failing. In Almog's picture there is no risk of making a mistake to fix reference, because having the object in mind is necessary and sufficient to determine reference. In Marti's picture, to determine reference it seems to be sufficient to have a causal connection with the referent and use language with the right intention. According to Marti, reference is attributive-free and determined by an unconventional use of linguistic expressions. According to Almog, reference is equally attributive-free, but determined in thought, and then expressed via conventional means which may or may not help the audience to individuate whom or what the speaker has in mind and is referring to.<sup>13</sup>

Let us take stock. With respect to descriptions, I have listed four different approaches to meaning and reference. The first one, which we may call «the orthodox view», sees semantics as essentially based on the mechanism of attribute satisfaction and sees reference as dependent on quantificational meaning. This is the view, among others, of Kripke and Bach. The second approach, which I presented by outlining Devitt's ideas, claims that referential uses are not based on a quantificational meaning. Devitt argues that reference is not posterior to quantification: While continuing to demand attribute satisfaction to support reference, he argues that there are referential meanings grounded in causal chains.

<sup>13</sup> It seems to me that Marti has some kind of two-stage theory too, for she allows for the possibility that, after having determined reference, the speaker might fail in communicating it (Marti 2008: 55-56).

In the third and fourth approach things change radically: satisfaction is no longer essential to reference. Marti asks us to look at referential uses of descriptions as dubbings, where convention does not play any role, although a referential intention to use language in a particular way is required. According to Almog, on the other hand, the fact that reference determinations are attribute-free does not depend on the intention to use language in a particular way, but on the subject being cognitively bound to the object.

In the next section I present some of my doubts about these accounts.<sup>14</sup> My concerns, far from being conclusive objections to the above mentioned models of reference, lead me to try to give an alternative explanation of what goes on in referential uses of descriptions (section VI).

## V.

Let us reconsider MacKay's accusation of allowing Humpty Dumpty to please himself (see section II). Humpty Dumpty changes, or purports to change, the meaning of words at his will: what he says is irrespective of any prior meanings of the words he uses. Patently, this accusation only makes sense if directed towards an account that admits that misdescriptions semantically refer.<sup>15</sup> This is not the case of Devitt's account.

How could Almog and Marti respond to this accusation instead? They would both reply that MacKay's charges are merely out of place, for different kinds of reasons. Indeed, in Almog's account words keep meaning what they conventionally mean; they are just not necessary for determining reference. Therefore Almog *is not* letting speakers change the meaning of words. However, one may object that he is not Humpty Dumptying meaning whilst nonetheless Humpty Dumptying reference. The natural reply ought to observe that Humpty Dumpty changes the language at his *will*, he whimsically *chooses* what he is saying, while Almog's speakers do not have this power, for they are bound by their causal relations: they have causal constraints. Hence Almog is Humpty Dumptying neither meaning nor reference, although I think that there is a problem in his approach, as will appear clear at the end of this section.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> My interest here is mainly to account for referential misdescriptions, so I focus on Almog's and Marti's views more than on Devitt's.

<sup>15</sup> In some sense, one might argue that MacKay's argument is relevant also if misdescriptions only pragmatically refer. Indeed, we cannot use whatever expression to pragmatically convey what we mean. This fact, however, does not impinge on the *meaning of words*.

<sup>16</sup> In fact, there might still be some problems for Almog's account on this point. It seems to me that it is possible to have more than one thing in mind and that one might be causally related to more than one thing at the same time. In this case, what decides what I am referring to?

Marti's reply would be different but would equally make MacKay's accusation empty. In Marti's view, there is no meaning to be changed: There is a causal-perceptual link between the speaker and the object, and the intention to use «words» unconventionally. So, if she is right about how proper names and descriptions work in reference, with no predicative material determining reference, then she is safe.

If we grant that this account of proper names is correct, it remains to be established whether descriptions referentially used behave as names in all respects, in every case. Kaplan (1989), the purported champion of pure referentialism, was not so sure about that. It seems that on many occasions there is a mixture of referential and attributive intention: The intention to refer to a particular is mixed with the intention to use descriptions with their attributive meaning.

Marti accounts for referential descriptions as purely referential, with no mixture of intentions. This is problematic, for if reference is accomplished by a *description*, then we are using words, not something used *as words* (see section IV). As I see it, if purely referential uses are possible, they are not the paradigmatic case of reference by description. Descriptions do not have capital letters, even though, sometimes, they may grow.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, we may like to distinguish referential uses of descriptions from (pure) reference by names.

I shall account for referential descriptions as involving a mixture of attributive and referential intention, that is to say that attributes do play a role in referential uses of descriptions. The problem is that if referential descriptions display these kinds of mixed intentions, we are again in trouble with MacKay's accusation of Humpty Dumptying language.

In section II we saw that speakers cannot refer to a given object using no matter what expression. For example, Donnellan in his 1968 paper argues that I cannot refer to a book by using the description «the square-root of two». As in the describing game (see section I), in a given situation the speaker has an object in mind and in order to refer to it uses those descriptions she thinks will help the audience to individuate that very object.

To this claim Donnellan adds another, according to which I cannot intend to do anything that pops into mind: I cannot intend to fly by flapping my arms, I cannot intend to refer to a book by saying «the square-root of two». In a nutshell, Donnellan seems to think that I cannot intend to do what is clearly impossible to achieve. With respect to reference, I would gloss him in this way: Speakers can refer to an object by a description, only if the phrase used is

<sup>17</sup> Presumably, something on these lines happened with «The Holy Roman Empire» (see Kripke 1980: 26).

actually a *description* of the object, that is to say if it is based on the properties they attribute to the object.<sup>18</sup>

In the end, Donnellan avoids the possibility of every description being used to refer to whatever object, because for each object, on each occasion, there are only some descriptions I can intend to use to refer to that object. If the proper intention is missing, no reference can occur. Donnellan blocks some referential uses at the very beginning of the process.<sup>19</sup> Notably, this option is not available to Almog, since he dissociates the reference determination stage from the reference communication stage: He is committed to saying that every description refers to the given object, if the proper cognitive bond stands. I think this is an unwelcome result of his view. It may be true that he is not Humpty Dumptying language but, nonetheless, he seems to render reference just *too easy* to accomplish and hardly distinguishable from plain thinking about an object.<sup>20</sup>

Correct as this distinction between Almog and Donnellan may be, the fact remains that Donnellan's intentional account of reference does not seem to make room for the possibility that reference may fail. Indeed, on this reading of Donnellan, what is necessary for reference is that the speaker should have the object in mind and that the «right» intention shows up. When referential

<sup>18</sup> I think that in this framework it is possible to accommodate the idea that the speaker can refer using a description which she does not believe applies to the object she has in mind. This can be done by contending that an object may have some sort of «second grade» properties. Having some first grade property attributed by somebody may constitute this kind of second grade property. They would be properties that other people – and not the speaker – attribute (in the first instance) to the object. It could happen that the object does not actually have the first grade property, or that the speaker believes it does not. This allows for the possibility that on a very specific occasion, if I am talking to some sort of Neo-Pythagorean person who believes that every object *is* a mathematical expression, and I am aware of that, maybe I could refer to a book with the words «the square root of two». I owe this example to Sebastiano Moruzzi. It is important to notice the occasion dependence of this concession. This is not to say that, in the end, all descriptions are always good for referring. It is true that it is usually possible to find a context which makes a use of an awkward description plausible, but the process of reference does not start from the description to go on to the context of its use. It is the other way round: Reference starts situated in a specified context and in *that* context only some descriptions can be used to refer.

<sup>19</sup> Donnellan (1966: 295-296) considers a case where, perhaps, reference actually fails. It is the case in which the speaker uses a description to refer, but there is actually nothing there, where the speaker thought there was something. First, I want to point out that it is very hard to imagine a situation where absolutely nothing is present. Indeed, Donnellan writes that maybe a trick of light made her think there was something, but is not even a trick of light something? Secondly, let us grant that there is nothing: In this case, the point of this reference failure seems to have to do more with a skeptic scenario than with problems *à la* MacKay. Reference fails because the relevant causal connection, which is a necessary condition for reference, is missing: arguments *à la* MacKay, instead, show up when the relevant causal connection is already given.

<sup>20</sup> As I pointed out in footnote 14, Marti distinguishes between reference determination and communication. To the extent to which the former is conceived as being quite independent from the second, she could be subject to a similar kind of criticism.

intention shows up it is already oriented towards communication, and constrained by everything which needs to constrain it. So one might conclude that having a referential intention is all there is to referring *tout court*. This approach to reference gives the whole theory a mentalistic spin which is disputable for one essential reason: reference is not a private mental fact happening in one's mind, but is a social fact related to there being an action.<sup>21</sup> For this reason in the next and last section I give an alternative account of why some misdescriptions, on specific occasions, cannot be used to refer. Such an account does not depend on some intentions being «prevented», but maintains the general inspiration of Donnellan's picture intact. I highlight one difference between my view and his, namely that only in my view may referential acts, as other actions, fail in accomplishing their results.

## VI.

As far as I understand the phenomenon of reference, it is an act speakers perform to talk about what they are thinking about, help the audience to pick out that very object and make it possible to predicate something of it.

To start with, one cannot refer to something without doing nothing at all: some action is needed in order to accomplish reference. Moreover, only some kinds of actions are suitable for this purpose. If one stands still, just thinking about a certain object, she is not referring to that object. One has to *try* to make somebody pay attention to the object she has in mind. Even if an *internal dubbing* has occurred and has fixed reference, until some external action is performed it is not right to say that fully-fledged reference has occurred. Reference needs externalization.

One way to put it is this: The process of reference starts with an object which «comes inside» the speaker, via an outside-in relation; at this point the speaker has the object in mind. *Then* the speaker tries to actually refer to it using language, using a tool, e.g. with a referential description, as Donnellan himself argues (see section 1). Such a description has to be based on the properties speakers attribute to the object (in the wide sense of footnote 19), in order to be a referential *description*.<sup>22</sup> So reference occurs when speakers project, so to speak, from the inside out again what they have in mind.

<sup>21</sup> Clearly this is not meant to be a knockdown argument against «mentalistic» theories of reference, but it shows that one might not want to allow for referential misdescriptions in exactly the same way as Donnellan does, even if one finds some of his intuitions convincing.

<sup>22</sup> I prefer not to take a stance here on whether the object in someone's mind in order to be *describable* has to have a linguistic structure in the first place.

Now, the question is: If descriptions must be *descriptions* to be capable of referring but it is not the speaker's mind alone which decides if something is a referential description or not, because reference depends on actual language use, then what is it that decides? The preliminary answer is simple: users of language! When speakers come to refer to the object they have in mind, they are constrained by at least two factors: by the conventional meanings of the words they use and by their expectations about the audience. This is essentially Donnellan's picture (as I understand it) of reference directed towards communication, with a modification: since reference does not depend on referential intention only but also on the way in which these intentions become actions, there is a chance that some referential uses simply fail in referring.

Intuitively, that reference fails means that the speaker utters a certain description with the intention to refer to a given object but we, as users of language, would not say that she has actually referred to that object. For instance, this would happen in the case where the speaker utters «the square-root of two» to refer to a book.<sup>23</sup>

If we take it for granted that I cannot refer to a book by saying «the square-root of two», it is natural to ask for more details about what these failures depend on. On the one hand, they might depend on *interpretation*, e.g., on the fact that the interpreter has not individuated the referent; on the other hand they might depend on the *production* of the uttered sentence, e.g., on the fact that the speaker has used a description which was not directed towards communication.

The first option, if intended as an *actual* interpretation, is problematic. There is the possibility that if nobody hears the utterance, no reference occurs, whereas it may be more natural to say that speakers refer to objects even if they are not heard. Another difficulty arises if the option is intended as a *possible* interpretation. In fact, we would not say that everything that might be *interpreted as* referring to an object does actually refer to it. More specifically, we would not say that a by-product of pure chance refers to anything. Imagine a scenario where there is an ant which, by crawling over the sand, traces a line.<sup>24</sup> By accident, that line looks like the sentence «Egypt is on fire». Its appearance is such that it can be *read as* saying that Egypt is on fire, but it clearly does not say anything: it is just a random combination of sand grains. So, it seems that we cannot make reference depend on the moment of interpretation alone. In some sense, any sensible view has to integrate these moments: I can hardly imagine a view where the two moments are completely independent. However, this merely reformulates the dilemma: you can either integrate interpretation

<sup>23</sup> I am admitting, for the sake of illustration, that it is possible to have such an intention. In the conclusion I give another, different, example of reference failure.

<sup>24</sup> The original example is due to Putnam (1981) and concerns a line interpreted as an image of Winston Churchill, which is then extended to the case of words.



into production or vice versa. Now, *if* it is right that to refer the speaker has to have the referent in mind, then – unless someone is a mind-reader – the more natural direction to take is to integrate the interpreter into the moment of production.

In the end, interpreters *have* a role in preventing some references from being successful. Even if they are not directly part of the act of reference, they are considered by speakers, who make them relevant for reference. In this picture, reference depends upon speakers, who are thus the authority for their referential acts. But their «power» is limited in three ways. First, they are limited by their causal relations: they cannot have in mind – and hence refer to – an object to which they are not causally related. Second, they are linguistically constrained: since reference is accomplished by linguistic means, they have to stick to public language meanings. Third, they are further constrained by communicative intentions towards interpreters: they have to try to help the interpreter to focus on the referent, hence they cannot use any old expression to refer, even if it is meaningful.

It is decided at the moment of production whether speakers are uttering meaningful words and whether they are referring or not. Speakers, as I have described them, are responsible for what they say, and for their own (referential) failures.

### *Conclusions*

In the picture of referential uses of descriptions I have given reference may fail when the speaker does not try to help the audience to individuate the intended referent. Accounting for reference failures as cases of failures to consider the uptake by the audience has major consequences on the whole theory of reference: I should like to suggest some of them. In the case of referential descriptions such a theory encourages a deeper understanding of what it is for a description to be a *description*. For instance, a description like «the thing» in most cases would not count as a description, since it can hardly help the audience to individuate the intended referent.<sup>25</sup> But the theory could also have consequences for what concerns the paradigmatic cases of reference, i.e. proper names. Whether it is correct to introduce a proper name, to dub something, might reasonably depend on the consideration of the audience's uptake of the

<sup>25</sup> Presumably «the thing» would be a useful referential description on those occasions where a deictic pronoun could be used in place of the description as well. Note that, in any case, it is very intuitive that one could intend to use «the thing» to refer to what she has in mind. So if it is true that reference fails in these cases, this fact certainly differentiates a «prevented intentions» account of reference from mine.

name. Then considering referential misdescriptions as having a relevant attributive character would not make them irreducibly different from other referential expressions, at least in some respects. At the same time this theory would allow us to maintain that different kinds of tools used to refer (names, descriptions, pronouns) each have their own peculiar behavior which cannot just be ignored.<sup>26</sup>

My account of reference is a two-stage one, where both stages are necessary. In the first stage, speakers come to have a particular in mind, by an outside-in relation. In the second stage, speakers utter a sentence whose description refers to the particular. Metaphorically speaking, after the world has entered into the speakers, it is projected from the inside-out again, through language.

I have given an account of referential descriptions that does not liken them to demonstratives, nor to logically proper names. In the end, I hope to have shown that, by conferring on speakers the limited authority to refer, it is possible to argue that misdescriptions semantically refer, avoid being vulnerable to arguments *à la* MacKay and maintain that attributes are relevant in referential uses of descriptions.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Each of these points clearly requires a longer discussion than the one I can give here.

<sup>27</sup> In the discussion I have assumed that referential uses are semantically relevant. Note, however, that the points about speakers and interpreters and the limitation of usable descriptions for the purpose of referring are independent of it.

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