

Against the semantic interpretation of the referential/attributive distinction

In this paper I would like to propose a new argument against the theory according to which the referential/attributive distinction of definite descriptions is a semantic one.

Donnellan claims that a definite description is referential when the speaker has the referent in mind. But he never explains what exactly means “to have the referent in mind”: a) does it mean to be in direct contact with the referent? b) Or perhaps to have a certain amount of information about the referent? c) Or to be at the end of a causal chain that starts with the referent?

I will show that whichever of these solutions is adopted there are cases in which we are not in a position to know whether a description is referential or attributive.

a) **Direct contact with the referent.** Firstly this solution is very restrictive. For instance, the definite description “the teacher of Alexander the Great” will be attributive even if the speaker has every sort of knowledge about Aristotle (perhaps she has read every book of Aristotle and every book about him). Secondly this solution suffer from the same uncertainties of the russellian notion of acquaintance: are we acquainted with physical objects or only with sense data? Are we acquainted with things we perceived in the past and which do not exist any more? And with things we saw only once for a second in the distance?

b) **To have a certain amount of knowledge about the referent.** How much information must one have to have an object in mind? E.g. if the speaker has a certain amount of information about the referent but not much information, does she have the referent in mind or not? Sometimes we are not in a position to decide if a speaker has an object in mind because he has too much information about it to say that he does not have it in mind, but not enough to say that he has it in mind. In these cases we cannot decide if the definite description he uses is referential or attributive.

c) **Causal chain between the referent and the speaker.** Suppose a journalist writes: “Paris Hilton is going to marry. Her husband is a singer”. Is there a causal chain that links Paris Hilton’s future husband with him? Maybe yes, maybe not. Perhaps he knows very well the singer so that the casual chain does exist. Perhaps he does not know him and he has discovered only indirectly that Paris Hilton is going to marry a singer. So we cannot decide if he uses the definite description referentially or attributively. This example generalizes. In many situations we have no idea of the relations between a speaker and the referent of her definite description and we cannot even imagine of which kind that description is.

That a distinction is fuzzy does not mean it is real and important. So the simple fact that, whatever standard is adopted, there are cases in which we cannot decide whether a definite description is referential or attributive does not militate against the distinction. However I think this fact has fatal consequences for the semantic interpretation of the distinction. In many occasions we cannot determine if the speaker uses a definite description referentially or attributively. If the referential/attributive distinction were a semantic one, we should conclude that we do not understand (or at least do not understand completely) what the speaker says. If the speaker uses the definite description “the F”, “the F” would mean two different things, depending on whether it is used in a referential or in attributive way. Since we do not often know whether “the F” has an attributive sense or a referential one, we are not in a position to determine if the description has one meaning or the other one. So we should conclude that we do not understand the exact meaning of the description and the speaker’s sentences in which that description occur should seem to us ambiguous.

But this is not the case. Suppose a journalist writes “The Rwanda president is going to visit London” and we do not know if she uses the definite description referentially or attributively. We must conclude, if we accept the semantic interpretation of the distinction, that we do not understand what the journalist wrote and that her sentence is ambiguous. But this is not true. That sentence is perfectly clear and unambiguous even if we do not know anything about the relations between the journalist and the president of Rwanda. I conclude that the referential/attributive distinction cannot be a semantic one.