

# REFERENTIAL DESCRIPTIONS REVISITED

Adriana Silva Graça  
University of Lisbon

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## Abstract

My aim is to discuss recent arguments for referential descriptions theses and to show why they are not good arguments. Showing this is a way of pointing out that the russellian philosophical insight behind his Theory of Definite Descriptions is basically correct. In the end, there are no referential descriptions but only referential uses of definite descriptions. So, russellian analysis of definite descriptions still stands.

## Keywords

Semantics, Pragmatics, Content, Character, Reference.

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## Introduction

In this paper I want to provide an argument to the effect that Keith Donnellans's distinction between 'attributive' and 'referential', in his seminal paper "Reference and Definite Descriptions" (Donnellan: 1966), is a distinction between two different uses of definite descriptions. It is not to be seen as a distinction between two different meanings those phrases may have. I think that Saul Kripke shows in "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference" (Kripke: 1979) that Paul Grice's distinction between the proposition semantically expressed by a certain utterance of a certain sentence and the proposition that the speaker wants to convey by that very same utterance, which is pragmatically implied by him (Grice: 1989), is enough to account for Donnellan's cases. Actually, on my view, there is no need to postulate more than one meaning a definite description may have in order to account for those cases; we can apply here Occam's razor, and accordingly not multiply meanings beyond necessity<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, Donnellan's primary distinction is between two uses and not between two meanings involving phrases of the form 'the F' in sentences of the form "The F is G". If this result is correct, it follows that what is traditionally seen as being the main argument against the basic idea of Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions collapses.

This philosophical problem – we may call it the referential descriptions problem – has already a long history, which begins with Peter Strawson's paper "On Referring" (Strawson: 1950). It

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<sup>1</sup> See Grice, H.P. (1989), p 47, where he states his "Modified Occam's Razor".

is fair to say that Strawson has been the first philosopher to sustain that definite descriptions may function in certain contexts as genuinely referential terms. For sake of brevity, my argument in this paper is only directed against recent attempts to support that general thesis and in particular against attempts to support the thesis according to which, besides two different uses, there are two different meanings involved in Donnellan's cases. In his paper "The Case for Referential Descriptions" (Devitt: 2003), Michael Devitt provides a powerful set of arguments for that thesis. If I am right, then something must be wrong with Devitt's views. I will try to state precisely what is wrong with them.

### Devitt's Argument

The core of the remarks made by Devitt on referential meanings is the following. There exists a convention according to which 'the F' is used in a sentence of the form 'the F is G' to express a singular thought, namely to express a thought about a particular object the speaker has in mind, even though 'the F' might actually misdescribe the object in question. Since it is the result of a convention, and since it determines the truth-value of what the speaker wants to communicate, the relation between the speaker and the object he has in mind when he uses 'the F' in uttering a sentence of the form 'the F is G' is to be seen as a semantic relation. Therefore, definite descriptions have two meanings: the referential ones, involved in such cases, and the attributive ones, long ago characterised by Bertrand Russell (Russell: 1905). Then Devitt provides an account of the semantic nature of the convention under consideration, an account relying on an analogy between referential tokens of 'the F' and tokens of complex demonstratives like 'that F'. It is alleged that if, for the demonstrative case, the convention to express a singular thought by a particular use of 'that F is G' is a semantic one, so the convention to express a singular thought must also be a semantic one for the definite description case; this is so given the fact that 'the F' and 'that F' may be substituted for one other without any cost with respect to the goal of communicating a singular thought. Finally, Devitt clarifies in virtue of what a singular thought is expressed in both cases, and why it is a thought about a particular object the speaker has in mind. According to him, there is a perceptual causal process underlying the link between the object and the singular thought about it, which is in turn essential to explain why a particular token of 'the F' designates the object it in fact designates.

Against Devitt I will then try to establish my main point: Donnellan's distinction is relative to two uses, not two meanings, of definite descriptions.

### Against Devitt's Argument

#### Part 1

What is the main problem with the very idea of a genuinely 'referential description'? If this idea were correct and in particular if Devitt's argument were sound, then all Grice teaches us about the difference between what is literally said in an utterance and what the speaker wants to communicate by it would be wrong. This distinction is usually taken as a distinction between two kinds of propositions; the proposition semantically expressed and the proposition pragmatically implied by a particular token of a sentence. According to Devitt, "it is a semantic not pragmatic fact that a certain description token refers to the person the speaker has in mind" (footnote 5). But if we try to apply this criterion for 'semanticity' to the cases discussed by Grice, we end up concluding that not only him but also a venerable tradition in the Philosophy of Language is wrong in classifying those phenomena as pragmatic ones. Now it does not seem to me Grice is wrong in that respect.

To see this, consider Devitt's argument to the effect that the relation between the speaker and the object he has in mind when he uses 'the F' in 'the F is G' is a semantic relation. As far as I can understand his point, this is so in virtue of two related phenomena. On the one hand, because

not only a few times, but very often and systematically, linguistic agents use definite descriptions to say something about specific objects they have in mind even when the descriptions misdescribe the objects. On the other hand, and more importantly, because what the speaker communicates using such descriptions determines the truth-value of his remarks. In addition, it is correctly noted by Devitt that the truth-value of the proposition communicated or conveyed by the speaker is normally not the same as the truth-value of the proposition literally expressed by the very same utterance. Therefore, he concludes, the relation between the speaker and the object he has in mind when he uses 'the F' in 'the F is G' can not be of any kind other than a semantic relation. According to him, this shows that definite descriptions, in general, can have two meanings.

Why in my view isn't this argument sound? It seems actually to be an inference to the best explanation. Taking as basic data two somehow odd phenomena, which often appear in given linguistic communities, Devitt tries to offer an account of them along the lines sketched above. I agree that Devitt's account is a possible one but I don't think it is the best one. For one thing, if his argument were sound, then we would have to postulate two different meanings each time someone uses a sentence (containing or not definite descriptions) to communicate or convey a proposition that does not coincide with the proposition literally expressed by the sentence. The whole distinction between semantics and pragmatics would collapse, or, if you want, all pragmatics would be just a proper part of semantics. The notion of ambiguity, of semantic ambiguity, would be dangerously trivialised. And I think this is too high a price to pay, given that there is another equally reasonable way of accounting for the phenomena noticed by Devitt.

If I say, for instance, "I brought nothing with me", while arriving at my office and realizing that I didn't bring with me my USB drive and the book I had to bring in order to work, the quantifier 'nothing', in this context, ranges over two objects. Does it follow from this fact that 'nothing' has its normal meaning and, in addition, this new meaning derived from what I wanted to communicate using the sentence in the specific context just mentioned? I don't think so. Nor do I need to postulate two different meanings for the sentence in order to explain that the truth-value of my remark depends on whether or not I brought with me the USB drive and the book. To account for this fact it is enough to notice that the relevant proposition, the one by means of which it is possible to determine the truth-value of my remark, is not the one literally expressed but the one I wanted to convey.<sup>2</sup>

We had better go along these lines to account for the phenomena considered by Devitt. Such an account would avoid the undesirable consequences mentioned above. Therefore, I am inclined to conclude the Donnellan cases explored by Devitt point to two different uses, not to two different meanings, of definite descriptions. Therefore, there are no referential descriptions.

## Against Devitt's Argument

### Part 2

It is possible to develop Devitt's own argument, the argument based on an analogy between complex demonstratives and definite descriptions used referentially, to identify the main difficulty of his account. Having in mind Kaplan's well known distinction between the character and the content of a demonstrative (Kaplan: 1989), and applying this distinction to the case of definite descriptions, it gets clear what is wrong with Devitt's view: it ignores the distinction between the content of what is said by a particular token of a sentence containing a definite description token and what sort of mechanism enables us to fix the reference of that token. This is enough to show that Devitt's argument is unsound, since it has a false premise. This is the claim that the convention for using 'the F' to express a singular thought is as semantic as the one governing the

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<sup>2</sup> S. Neale makes a similar point (1990, pp 87, 88).

complex demonstrative ‘that F’. Hence, Devitt’s argument does not succeed in establishing the truth of its conclusion, namely, that there can be two meanings for definite descriptions. I think this point illuminates the discussion that has been going on about the topic since 1966.

Let me elaborate on this a bit. For the complex demonstrative case, the content or meaning of a sentence containing “That F” is whatever turns it possible assigning a truth-value to what is said by a particular token of it with respect to possible circumstances of evaluation (actual or not). Given compositionality, the content of the whole is determined by the content of each part. Thus, given that ‘that’ is a directly referential term it contributes to the content of the sentence token in which it occurs only the object picked out in the context of utterance. But what, in turn, determines the content of the complex demonstrative token ‘that F’ with respect to each context of utterance? Well, what enables us to fix its reference with respect to a given context, is (in addition to an appropriate ostension) its character or linguistic meaning. It is the character of the demonstrative that is (at least in part) relevant to identify which object one is talking about each time we use it. Extending these remarks by analogy to the referential uses of definite descriptions, we can say that the content or meaning of a sentence containing “The F” is, as above, whatever turns it possible to assign a truth-value to what is said by a particular token of it with respect to a possible circumstance of evaluation. If the description is being used referentially, it will contribute to the content of the sentence token in which it occurs only the object picked out in the context of utterance, as in the previous case. So far so good. But what, in turn, enables us to determine the content of the definite description token (used referentially) is just something like the speaker’s intentions while using it. The crucial difference between this case and case of complex demonstratives is that there is no need for linguistic meanings at all to identify which object one is talking about, because there is no semantic analogue for them in definite descriptions case.

Now, coming back to Devitt argument, we have seen that it is alleged there that if, for complex demonstratives case, the convention to express a singular thought by a particular use of ‘that F is G’ is a semantic one, so the convention to express a singular thought must also be a semantic one for definite descriptions case. Remember that this is so given the fact that ‘the F’ and ‘that F’ may be replaced by one other without any cost with respect to the goal of communicating a singular thought. But even if one acknowledges that tokens of the phrases ‘the F’ and ‘that F’ are inter-changeable in appropriate contexts and that the proposition that is going to be truth-evaluated in possible circumstances of evaluation is therefore the same in both cases, there is a huge difference between them. The difference can be put as follows. What enables us to determine what is said in both cases is essentially different. For the demonstrative case, it is – at least in part - its linguistic meaning; for the definite description case it is only the speaker’s intentions. If one asks ‘in virtue of what a singular thought is conveyed in both cases?’, the answers would identify totally different phenomena. In the demonstrative case, a singular thought is expressed in virtue of the linguistic meaning of the demonstrative; whereas, in referential uses of the definite descriptions, a singular thought is conveyed only in virtue of the speaker’s intentions. That is enough to show that the idea according to which the convention for using ‘the F’ to express a singular thought is as semantic as the one governing ‘that F’ is simply false. As we have seen, it is not in virtue of (say) a semantic fact that a singular thought is communicated by a certain utterance of a sentence containing a definite description used referentially. Therefore, Devitt’s argument does not succeed in establishing the truth of its conclusion, namely, that there are two different meanings for definite descriptions.

A classical example will help a bit. Consider the sentences S1 and S2 below containing, respectively, the definite description ‘the F’ and the complex demonstrative ‘that F’.

S1: “The man drinking champagne is happy tonight”

S2: “That man drinking champagne is happy tonight”

It is alleged by those who claim there are two meanings for definite descriptions that a token

of S1 is ambiguous and may express at least two different propositions: a proposition P, that is forthcoming when one uses the definite description ‘The man drinking champagne’ attributively, and a proposition Q, that is forthcoming when one uses the definite description ‘The man drinking champagne’ referentially. P is a general proposition, which says about the person, whoever he/she is, that is drinking champagne that he/she is happy at a certain moment. Q is a singular proposition, which says about a specific person – whom the speaker thinks is drinking champagne – that he/she is happy at a certain moment. Q is true even if the person about whom the speaker wants to say something is actually not drinking champagne; Q is true if and only if the relevant person is happy at the relevant moment. On the contrary, a necessary condition for P being true is the existence of some person, whoever he/she is, that is actually drinking champagne at the relevant moment. P is true if and only if, in addition, no more than one person satisfies the condition of drinking champagne at the moment and that person is happy then.

It is worth noting that it is not necessary to postulate an ambiguity to accommodate these cases, as we have already seen. The reason is that when the description is being used attributively it is P that is semantically expressed by a token of S1; but when the very same description is being used referentially, P continues to be semantically expressed by that other token of S1. The difference between the referential and the attributive cases consists in the fact that in the referential case the sentence token additionally conveys the proposition Q (besides expressing P), whereas that is not obviously so in the attributive case. P is semantically expressed in both cases; Q is pragmatically implied only when a referential use of the definite description is taking place (as Kripke claims). P and Q may, obviously, have different truth-values. In the classical example, it turns out that P is false, because the man that fits the descriptions is miserable that night, and Q is true, because the person about whom the speaker wants to say something is happy that night.

Let us turn now to S2, the sentence containing the complex demonstrative ‘That man drinking champagne’. A token of S2 may express a singular proposition interchangeable with Q, the proposition pragmatically implied by a token of S1 where the definite description is used referentially. But the crucial difference to the referential description case is the following: the proposition Q is semantically expressed by a token of S2, not merely pragmatically implied by it (as in the case of a token of S1 where the definite description is used referentially). It is (at least in part) the character or the linguistic meaning of the demonstrative ‘that’ that enables us to identify the person about whom the speaker wants to talk and say that he is happy at a certain moment, not merely the speaker’s intentions.

At this point someone might reply as follows. Look, you are dealing with the complex demonstrative ‘that F’ and not with the simple demonstrative ‘that’. That makes all the difference because Q is identifiable by a token of S2 even when the predicate F doesn’t apply to the person about whom the speaker wants to say something. But this objection is not a good one because, even conceding that Q is identifiable by a token of S2 even when the predicate F is not true of the relevant person, the linguistic meaning or character of ‘that’ is doing a job in identifying the object about which one is talking. Hence, the reference is being fixed not only in virtue of the speaker’s intentions, and that is enough for our purposes.

To sum up, Devitt claims that if the convention for using S2 (the sentence containing the complex demonstrative) to express a singular thought is obviously a semantic one, and if we can substitute S1 for S2, without any cost for the purpose of communicating a singular thought, then, the convention for using S1 (the sentence containing the definite description used referentially) to express a singular thought must be also a semantic one. Therefore, definite descriptions have two meanings. It is now clear why this conclusion is not true: although the reasoning is valid, the idea that the convention for using S1 to express a singular thought is a semantic convention is simply false. Hence, it does not follow that definite descriptions do not just have one meaning. Russell’s Theory of Definite Descriptions is still, on my view, basically correct.

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