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## Keith Donnellan's reference and definite description revisited

Jan Enviro A Quiambao

De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines

\* Corresponding Author: Jan Enviro A Quiambao

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### Abstract

The author of this study revisits and re-examines Keith Donnellan's 1966 reference and definite description. According to Donnellan, the definite description can be used in two ways: attributively and referentially. The former asserts the subject being discussed, whereas the latter refers to the issue a speaker intends to discuss. When a definite description is employed in a referential manner, the speaker implies the existence of a specific someone or thing that fits the description. In the attributive usage of definite descriptions, no such presupposition exists. Russell and Strawson both failed to recognize the dual nature of the roles of definite descriptions, and this study re-examines their errors.

**Keywords:** Attributive, definite descriptions, Donnellan, reference, Russell, Strawson

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### Introduction

Today, many refer to the description theory of reference as fit for the big old, debunked notions of the past. The author of this study will return and analyze Keith Donnellan's 1966 reference and definite description. The discussion will proceed as follows: (1) a revisiting of Bertrand Russell's theory of definite description; (2) Peter Frederick Strawson's reference and truth-values; (3) Russell and Strawson's common errors in their theories; (4) Donnellan's argument against both of the authors as mentioned earlier; and (5) the use of reference and definite description.

According to Donnellan, definite descriptions can be utilized in two unique ways. On occasion, they are used in a referential manner. At other times, they are used descriptively. He maintains that a speaker who utilizes a definite description attributively in an assertion says something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so. A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an argument. On the other hand uses the description to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about and states something about that person or thing (Donnellan 1966, 285) <sup>[1]</sup>.

According to Donnellan, it is not specific descriptions themselves that are referential or attributive, but rather their treatment as linguistic expressions. He contends that we cannot inquire about the purpose of a description in a phrase in isolation from the context in which it is used. According to Donnellan, both Russell and Strawson presume that "we can ask how a definite description functions in some sentence independently of a particular occasion upon which it is used" (Donnellan 1966, 282) <sup>[1]</sup>.

### Russell and Strawson Errors

Russell and Strawson's best-known theories of definite descriptions failed to account for the duality of function that obscures the proper referring use of definite descriptions. Before highlighting Donnellan's reference and definite explanation, it is necessary to explore the elements of Russell and Strawson's ideas that are vitally crucial.

On the one hand, Russell contends that while employing a definite description, a speaker may use a term that denotes some entity; nonetheless, Russell recognizes only this relationship between that entity and the use of the definite description.

Furthermore, in his opinion, a proper name is the type of phrase that comes anywhere close to executing the role of the referential usage of precise description.

On the other hand, Strawson is well aware of the definite description's referential usage. However, he failed to recognize that the definite description has a different purpose and can be employed in a nonreferential context, even in the same sentence.

According to Strawson, the nonreferential applications of definite description appear to depend on the type of sentence in which they occur.

The initial hypothesis held by Russell and Strawson about the subject of how definite description functions. Some definite descriptions function independently in the context in which they are employed. This notion, however, is not refuted in Strawson's arguments against Russell. Although he meant to contradict the radical idea that an authentic referring statement has a referent, it serves to refer regardless of the context of some usage of the term. The rejection of this viewpoint does not imply that definite descriptions cannot be regarded as referring expressions in a sentence except if the sentence is employed.

This is the second premise that Russell and Strawson's account of definite descriptions shares. A person who uses a definite description is said to presuppose or indicate that something fits the description in many circumstances (Strawson 1950, 332) <sup>[4]</sup>. For example, stating that the monarch is on his throne implies or presupposes the existence of a king. Both Russell and Strawson believe that when a presupposition or inference is wrong, the truth value of what the speaker says suffers. According to Russell, the claim is false, and according to Strawson, it has no truth value.

### Referring and Denoting

It will be helpful to highlight different assumptions about descriptions in order to create an analysis of the distinctions between these two applications of definite descriptions. Russell and Strawson, according to Donnellan, both share. As we've already witnessed. Russell and Strawson differ on the linguistic role that definite descriptions serve. They are not true referring terms, according to Russell. They serve as quantifier phrases instead. Descriptions, according to Strawson, are valid referring terms. Regardless of this fundamental disagreement. Donnellan, Russell, and Strawson share the following fundamental assumptions.

1. We can identify the linguistic role that a description plays regardless of the context in which it is utilized.
2. Speakers who utilize descriptions suggest or infer that something fits the description.
3. There is only one valid account of how the speaker's truth value is changed when this presupposition or inference is erroneous.

### Keith Donnellan's Reference and Definite Description Discussed

According to Donnellan, the definite description can be used in two ways. On the one hand, the definite description is utilized when the speaker makes an attributional claim about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so. On the other hand, when a speaker utilizes a specific description referentially in an assertion, he allows his audience to identify whom or what he is referring to and declares something about that person or thing.

The definite description can occur primarily in the first case

because the speaker seeks to assert something about whoever meets the description. In the referential sense, a defined description is just a tool for executing a specific job of drawing attention to a person or object. To learn more about the distinctions between attributive and referential uses of the definite description. Donnellan explained the following cases in his published article.

#### 1. Smith's murderer is insane

Assume we first come across unfortunate Smith, who has been brutally slain. We might shout, "Smith's murderer is insane," based on the brutality of the killing and the fact that Smith was the most lovable person on the planet. This is an attributional application of the definite description. Assume, on the other hand, that Jones has been charged with Smith's murder and is standing trial. Jones, on the other hand, had unusual behavior during the trial. People's reactions to his actions can be summarized as "Smith's murderer is insane." These two uses of the definite description in the same sentence are distinct and are best illustrated by discussing the implications of the assumption that Smith did not have a murderer. In all cases, the speaker assumes or indicates that there is a killer by using the specific word "Smith's murderer." However, when it is hypothesized that a presupposition or inference is erroneous, there are two options. In both circumstances, the predicate "is insane," but in the first case, if there is no killer, there is no one to whom it is correct to assign the insanity. Only if someone matched the description could such a person be recognized. However, in the second scenario, where the definite description is only a way of identifying the person we wish to discuss, the correct identification can be established even if no one fits the description we provided (Linsky 1971, 74) <sup>[2]</sup>.

Both the attributive and referential uses of definite description appear to entail the implication or premise that something fits the description. However, the reasons for the existence of the presupposition or implication differ in both circumstances. When a person provides a definite description in a referential sense, it is assumed that he believes what he desires to refer to fits the description. Because the objective of employing the description is to enable the audience to pick out or think about the correct thing or person. One would generally select a description that he believes the thing or person fits. Commonly, a misdescription of what one wishes to allude to would mislead the audience. As a result, there is an assumption that the speaker believes something matches the description to which he refers. However, when a definite description is employed attributively, the danger of misdescription is not as great.

A definite description used attributively bears the assumption or implication because if nothing meets the description, the linguistic objective of the speech act is foiled. If the speaker makes an assertion, he will not succeed in expressing something true; if he has asked a question that can be answered, he will not succeed in asking a question that cannot be replied; and he will not succeed in giving an order that can be obeyed if he has given an order.

When the definite description is employed referentially, the presupposition or implication arises simply from the fact that generally, a person strives to explain correctly what he wants to refer to because this is usually the best method to convince his audience to understand what he is referring to. Because when the definite description is employed referentially, one's audience may be able to see what one is referring to even if

neither it nor anything else fits the description. Furthermore, a speaker may declare something true even though the description is incorrect. The sense in which he can say something true about someone or something is the sense in which he can say something truthful about someone or anything.

### **Conclusion**

To summarize, real proper names, according to Russell, would refer to something without endowing it with any qualities. One could refer to the object itself, rather than just the thing in the sense that it fits a given description. Russell's definite description assumed that definite descriptions were incapable of referring and would only refer to something that satisfied the definition. Not only is this assumption incorrect, but so much more is explained in this paper. When a specific description relates to something, a speaker can be reported as having said it. Individuals are not limited to the description he gave when describing what it was about which he stated something. Anyone can be referred to using any description, name, or another appropriate identifier. When a speaker's linguistic act referentially uses a definite description, the speaker conveys a sense in which he is concerned with the object itself rather than the thing under the certain description. Russell's proper names are closer to fulfilling the definite description than he could have imagined.

Furthermore, when people use descriptions rather than proper names, they may inject an element of generality that should not be there if they are referring to something specific.

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