

# *Roundabout Semantic Significance of the “Attributive/Referential” Distinction*



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## ***Abstract***

In this paper, I argue that contrary to the approach widely taken in the literature, it is possible to retain Russell’s theory of definite descriptions and grant some semantic significance to the distinction between the attributive and the referential use. The core of the argumentation is based on recognition of the so-called “round-about” way in which the use of a definite description may be significant to the semantic features of the sentence: it is a case where the use of a description contributes to the semantics of the sentence by affecting another expression of that sentence. I offer an appropriate example which illustrates the case in question and I demonstrate that the semantic difference between the two uses can be easily captured by Russell’s account.

Many theorists of natural language firmly disagree whether Donnellan’s distinction between the attributive and the referential uses of definite descriptions is semantically significant. That is to say, the dispute is whether a sentence containing a phrase of the form “the *F*” has different semantic properties (like the meaning, or the proposition it expresses) when the description is used attributively than when it is used referentially. According to one view in this debate, all differences between the two uses have pragmatic character and do not involve the semantic features of a sentence in which a description occurs. The proponents of this position usually defend Russell’s quantificational theory as a universal semantic account of sentences with definite description. On the contrary, their antagonists claim that while Russell’s theory most likely suits the attributive uses, it is definitely not correct in the case of the referential use. In particular, they argue that definite descriptions have two different semantic functions – they are devices of quantification *and* reference – and these functions are reflected, respectively, by the attributive and the referential ways of using descriptions. In brief – we have, on one hand, “Russellianists” who deny semantic significance of Donnellan’s distinction and, on the other hand, there are “Anti-Russellianists” who ascribe such significance to the aforementioned distinction.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I will argue that Donnellan's distinction is semantically significant to a certain degree which has not been yet recognized in the literature. However, as I will demonstrate, this fact does not rule out Russell's theory of definite descriptions. Strictly speaking, a different use of a definite description may determine a different semantic analysis of the sentence containing that description, nevertheless, under both uses, the interpretation of the sentence can be captured by Russell's theory. In section (I), I present briefly Donnellan's distinction and discuss three different ways in which the use of a definite description can affect the semantics of a sentence. Only two of them imply Russell's theory is not universally correct. In section (II), I present an example of a complex sentence in which a definite description is embedded and argue that its use affects the semantics of this sentence in the third of the distinguished ways. At the same time, I demonstrate that we can account for the difference in the framework of Russell's theory. Section (III) delivers some conclusions.

## I

Russell's theory claims that a sentence of the form "The  $F$  is  $G$ " does not express a singular proposition about a particular object which "the  $F$ " denotes, but it expresses a complex general proposition which may be captured as follows:

- (1) There is  $x$  such that  $x$  is uniquely  $F$  and for every  $y$ , if  $y$  is  $F$ ,  $y$  is  $G$ .

As many theorists have argued, this account does not take into consideration that descriptions<sup>2</sup> can be used as devices of reference and, for various reasons, it fails when the use of a description is referential. In particular, Donnellan distinguishes two uses of descriptions – the attributive and the referential one – and argues that analysis (1) captures (at best) only the attributive use of "the  $F$ ." According to Donnellan, an assertion of the form "The  $F$  is  $G$ " is used attributively, if the speaker states something equivalent to "Whatever is the  $F$  is  $G$ ". In such a use, the speaker only intends to correlate  $F$ -hood with  $G$ -hood rather than to ascribe  $G$ -hood to a certain independently identified object ([compare: 1, p.2].) In contrast, the speaker uses the description referentially, if (i) there is particular  $d$  which he has in mind while saying "the  $F$ ", (ii) he uses the description only to enable his audience to recognize that he is talking about  $d$ . In other words, by uttering "The  $F$  is  $G$ ", the speaker asserts that  $d$  is  $G$ .

In order to illustrate the difference between the two uses, Donnellan asks us to consider two different situations of uttering the sentence:

(2) Smith's murderer is insane.

Firstly, suppose that you have already found Smith's body brutally mutilated. Based on the manner of the killing, you come to the conclusion that whoever murdered Smith must be insane and you formulate it as (2). This is the attributive use of "Smith's murderer". Secondly, imagine that you are at the trial of Jones who has been proclaimed guilty for murdering Smith and, suddenly, the defendant starts to behave in an odd manner. While looking at Jones, you utter (2). Here, you use "Smith's murderer" referentially, since you have Jones in mind when using a description and you expect your audience to realize it.

There is a lot which may be said about this distinction, however, what has mostly attracted the attention of the philosophers of language is the question whether there is any semantic difference between these two ways of using a sentence like (1).<sup>3</sup> In general, there have been three responses to this question. The most radical says that the two tokens of "Smith' murderer" – as used on these two occasions – have a different *meaning*. That is to say, the expressions of the form "the F" are, in principle, ambiguous as they have one meaning corresponding to the attributive use and another one corresponding to the referential use. This is actually a view defended by [5] and [2] who argue that the ambiguity of descriptions should be conceived as a polysemy and not a homonymy (in other words, descriptions are more like the word "mouth" than the word "bank".) The second response to the above question is that Donnellan's distinction does not indicate a semantic ambiguity, nevertheless, under the two uses, a sentence with a description expresses different kinds of propositions: it expresses a general proposition when the use is attributive and a singular one when the use is referential. This position is defended by [10], [4] and presumably by Donnellan himself in [6]. As the view in question acknowledges that the use of the description affects the propositional content of the sentence, it grants some semantic significance of the distinction. Finally, there is a wide response which denies that the use of the description affects the meaning or the proposition expressed by a sentence, but only the proposition *implied*. That is to say, under the two uses, a sentence like (1) always expresses a general proposition, however, when the speaker uses a description referentially, he implies a singular proposition (see [9] and [3]). Such a view reject the thesis that Donnellan's distinction is semantically significant.<sup>4</sup>

In sum, there are two positions which acknowledge semantic significance of Donnellan's distinction. According to the first one, the description use is relevant to the meaning of the sentence, while according to the second one, the level of the meaning is unaffected, but the use contributes to the propositional content of the utterance. However, I think that these two approaches – each represented widely in the literature – do not exhaust all the options. In particular, one may wonder if it is so that although the use of a description does not affect the meaning and the propositional content in principle, in *some* cases, the use is relevant to the propositional content of a sentence because it affects *other* elements of that sentence. For instance, the use of a description may influence the syntactic scope of an operator embedded in the sentence and – as a result – it may contribute to the proposition expressed.

In order to explain the difference between the distinguished position and the other views which grant semantic significance of Donnellan's distinction, I will make some terminological adjustments. In general, I will say that the distinction of uses of the expressions of type *E* is *semantically significant* iff

- (a) there are some sentences containing *E* which differ from each other in at least some semantic respects (the meaning or the propositional content etc.) under various uses of *E*.

In particular, I will say that the distinction of uses of *Es* has *straightforward* semantic significance if:

- (b) the use of *E* affects the semantic properties of *E* and, as a consequence, it contributes to the semantic properties of *every* sentence in which *E* occurs.

On the other hand, I will say that the distinction has *roundabout* semantic significance if the following is the case:

- (c) in *some* sentences in which *E* occurs, the use of it influences another expression occurring in the sentence and, in consequence, it contributes to the semantic properties of the whole sentence.

In brief, the semantic significance is straightforward if the use of *E* contributes to the semantics of the sentence straightforwardly – by affecting the semantics of *E*. For example, we commit ourselves to the view that the “attributive/referential” distinction has straightforward semantic significance if we maintain, like Devitt does, that the referential use of “the

F” determines the referential meaning of that expression (and so it determines a different meaning of “The *F* is *G*” than the attributive use does.) Also, we commit ourselves to such a view if we say, similarly to Donnellan, that although the use of a description is not relevant to its meaning, it still affects its semantics: on a particular occasion, the description plays a role of a quantifier, on another one, it is a referring term.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, to ascribe roundabout semantic significance to the distinction is to say that in some sentences, the use of a description contributes to the semantics of a sentence in a roundabout way – due to its impact on another expression in the sentence.

It is important to note that both kinds of semantic significance imply that the way of using an expression may be relevant to the propositional content of the sentence. (That is why, they are “semantic”.) However, the important difference between these two cases is *how* the impact on the propositional content is made. In the case of the straightforward semantic influence, the use of an expression determines the propositional content due to its impact on the semantic properties of the expression itself. In the case of the roundabout significance, a different use generates a different propositional content *as a result* of its influence on another element of the sentence.<sup>6</sup>

The positions presented in the literature – conceiving Donnellan’s distinction as semantic – usually ascribe what I have labelled as “straightforward” semantic significance to the distinction. The position which I have distinguished as a third version of such a view is, in fact, that the distinction has *only* roundabout semantic significance. In the next section, I will put forward an argument for the claim that the “attributive/referential” distinction has roundabout semantic significance. That is to say, I will present an example of a sentence in which the referential use of the contained description apparently determines a different reading than the attributive use – due to its impact on an operator occurring in the sentence.

An important difference between the claim that Donnellan’s distinction has roundabout significance and the thesis that it is straightforwardly semantic is that the former one is not inconsistent with Russell’s theory. That is because, contrary to the latter position, it does not require two different semantic analyses of the descriptions themselves. As we will see, the different readings of a sentence which both uses may generate – by affecting some of the expressions occurring in the sentence – can be represented in the framework of Russell’s quantificational account.

## II

Let me expand the story of Smith's murder. Suppose that the investigation has finally shown that Smith was killed by one of his nephews who inherits his uncle's fortune (assume that Smith was very rich.) At the moment when I heard about the crime, I immediately thought that someone had committed it for money. So when the case is over and the murderer has been identified, I exclaim:

- (3) I have suspected from the beginning that the murderer of Smith was a member of his family!

In my statement, I clearly use the description "the murderer of Smith" attributively – I talk about whoever killed Smith (the fact that I have just learnt who committed the crime is irrelevant to my claim, since my suspicion arose when I did not know who the murderer was.) In other words, my intention is only to stress the correlation between being the murderer and being a member of the victim's family. In sum, what my statement expresses is the proposition that I have had a suspicion (from the beginning) that the person who killed Smith – whoever he or she was – is a member of Smith's family.

Consider now what happens if the description in (3) were used referentially in the presented context. That is to say, imagine that by using "the murderer of Smith", I refer to Smith's nephew or any other particular individual I have in mind. It is quite easy to observe that – under such a use – my statement would express an essentially different proposition than in the case of the attributive use. By using "the murderer of Smith" referentially, I would express the thought that I have suspected *this particular man* – whom I presuppose to be the murderer – of being a Smith's relative. In other words, the proposition expressed would be that from the beginning, I have had a suspicion concerning one particular person.

Here we come to the point I want to make. The attributive use of the description "Smith's murderer" in (3) determines a different propositional content of the sentence than the referential use does. In my opinion, this difference is a result of the influence of the description use on the syntactic scope of the expression "I have suspected that...". Namely, when I use the description attributively – in order to talk about whoever has a certain property – the operator "I have suspected..." has a wider extent. In contrast, when the description is used referentially, the operator has clearly a narrower extent. Under such a use, the sentence is equivalent to "The murderer of Smith is such that I have suspected him from the

beginning to be Smith’s relative.” So, the use of the description affects the syntactic scope of the expression “I have suspected that...” and, in consequence, it contributes to the semantic interpretation of (3). In other words, the use is semantically significant in the roundabout way.

It is easy to recognize that we can handle the indicated phenomenon when we stand on the position that Russell’s account is universally applicable. As it is well-known, Russell’s theory of descriptions can efficiently represent scopal differences as far as various constructions with descriptions are concerned. Firstly, using Russell’s method, we can easily paraphrase (3) in its attributive use. This will be:

- (4) I have suspected from the beginning that: there is  $x$  such that  $x$  uniquely murdered Smith and for every  $y$ , if  $y$  murdered Smith,  $y$  is a member of Smith’s family.

Another option is the following:

- (5) There is  $x$  such that  $x$  uniquely murdered Smith and I have suspected from the beginning that for every  $y$ , if  $y$  murdered Smith,  $y$  is a member of Smith’s family.

In my opinion, though these two readings seem to be equally admissible in the case of the attributive use, the former one is more accurate. We can recognize it by considering the consequences of an assumption that Smith, nevertheless, died of a heart attack (although he drank a cup of poisoned tea prepared by his greedy nephew.) In such circumstances, *there is no* such person as the murderer of Smith and so (5) is false. In spite of this, the intuition says that (3) may very well be true. Hence, what (3) actually expresses is rather (4).

On the other hand, when the description in (3) is used referentially, it acquires the following Russellian interpretation:

- (6) There is  $x$  such that  $x$  uniquely murdered Smith and for every  $y$ , if  $y$  murdered Smith, *I have suspected from the beginning that*  $y$  is a member of Smith’s family.

The presented reading entails that I have had a suspicion concerning particular  $y$  – who is the murderer of Smith – that  $y$  is Smith’s relative. So it seems to be compatible with what I intuitively express by using “Smith’s murderer” referentially in my utterance of (3). In sum, a proponent of Russell’s theory can easily account for the difference the two uses make: when the use is attributive, (3) expresses (4) (optionally (5)); when the use is referential, the sentence expresses (6).

One may wonder (as did one of the reviewers of the draft of this article) *why* it is actually so that the use of the description influences the scope of the propositional operator and whether this phenomenon generally occurs in other constructions in which descriptions are embedded. A full response to these questions requires a careful analysis of various complex constructions, which would exceed the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, I will briefly indicate a reason why, I think, the referential use generally makes the scope of an intensional operator *narrower* in contrast to the attributive use.

The impact of the description use on the scope-interpretation is, in my opinion, a result of a different role which the descriptive part of the description plays under both uses. In the referential use, the descriptive content has only to enable the audience to recognize which particular object the speaker has in mind (as Donnellan says, the description is “merely” a tool of calling attention to a certain individual and “any other device for doing the same job, another description or a name, would do as well.” ([6, p.285])). On the other hand, when the description is *within* the syntactical scope of an intensional operator, its descriptive part becomes essential so that its function is *not* “merely” calling attention to a particular individual. For example, its role may be to express the mode of how a belief-holder represents the object as far as belief-ascriptions are concerned. In consequence, when a speaker *only points* his audience to a particular individual – i.e., he has no intention of assigning any additional role to the descriptive content of “the *F*” – an interpretation with a wider scope of an intensional operator over predicate “*F*” seems to be cancelled. In contrast, the attributive use of “the *F*” is a case in which *F*-hood is essential from the viewpoint of the speech-act. That is why, this use easily allows for an interpretation with a wider scope of an intensional operator in a given complex construction.

### III

Let me briefly summarize my analysis. I have said that there have been presented two kinds of the view that Donnellan’s distinction is semantically significant. The first one posits a semantic ambiguity of descriptions related to the “attributive/referential” dichotomy, the second one claims that the two uses determine – in principle – two different propositional contents of sentences containing descriptions. As I have claimed, there is a third possibility. We may say that the distinction has only roundabout semantic significance, that is, the use of the description does not

contribute to the meaning or the propositional content by itself, but it can do so due to its impact on another elements. My aim was not to demonstrate that the distinction has only roundabout semantic significance (because it would require showing that the distinction is not straightforwardly semantic at the same time, which extends the scope of this paper.) Instead, my purpose was to argue that the use of the description can be semantically relevant in the specified way and that this fact can be easily accommodated by Russell's account of descriptions.

The conclusions from my analysis are as follows. Firstly, the “attributive/referential” distinction is undoubtedly semantically significant – in the sense specified in (a). As example (3) shows, the use of the description can affect the semantic features of the sentence. It is important to note that the difference I have indicated is independent of any particular account of descriptions, since it rests only on the impact which the two uses have on the syntactic scope of a sentential operator. In fact, *regardless of what particular theory* of descriptions we actually presume, utterance (3) must acquire various semantic analyses depending on the use of “Smith's murderer.” Secondly, my considerations show that we *can* preserve Russell's account of descriptions while not being committed to the thesis that the differences between two uses of descriptions are solely pragmatic. A further question which my analysis poses is whether there is a unitary semantic account of descriptions which is capable of giving an adequate account for *every case* in which the “attributive/referential” distinction displays its roundabout semantic significance.

## Notes

- 1 There are, of course, some exceptions to this picture. For example, [11] outlines a theory of definite descriptions which treats them unequivocally as referring expressions (so in a non-“Russellian” way), however, as the author indicates, his proposal can be extended to include two separate semantic analyses of the attributively and the referentially used definite descriptions. In both cases, the logical form of a sentence containing a definite description is the same, but its truth conditions are different. See: [11, pp.379-381].
- 2 For the sake of brevity, I will use the term „description(s)” instead of „definite description(s)”
- 3 For example, we may ask whether the distinction is adequate and clear-cut. Though many philosophers find it correct, there are some exceptions (e.g., [7]; see his discussion about the attributive use with [1]).
- 4 For a more detailed summary of the discussion of the significance of Donnellan’s distinction see [8].
- 5 Compare to Donnellan ([6, pp.297-298]) where he says that one cannot assign a particular semantic function to a description (i.e., one cannot classify it as a referring term, a quantifier etc.) in isolation from a particular context of use.
- 6 The theses that (A) the “attributive/referential” distinction has straightforward semantic significance, (B) it has roundabout semantic significance, are logically independent. That is to say, the claim that the use of a description affects its semantic properties does not imply that it may ever affect the features of another expression. In short, (A) does not entail (B). On the other hand, one may deny that the semantic properties of a description are affected by the way of using it, but agree that the description use can contribute to the semantic analysis of the sentence by affecting its other expressions. So, (B) does not entail (A).

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