

On the referential/attributive distinction

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1. Introduction

Donnellan in his paper 'Reference and definite descriptions' distinguishes two uses of definite descriptions: the referential and the attributive. According to Donnellan (1977: 46), 'A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so and so. A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an assertion, 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 illustrates this distinction with the well-known example in (1):

(1) Smith's murderer is insane.

Suppose the speaker comes upon Smith foully murdered by someone unknown to her. Because of the brutality of the crime she might exclaim 'Smith's murderer is insane'. What the speaker means to say on this occasion is that whoever murdered Smith is (must be) insane. In this case the definite description 'Smith's murderer' is used attributively.¹ Suppose now that Jones is on trial for Smith's murder. Observing his behaviour the speaker might utter (1) meaning to state that Jones is insane. In this case the speaker has a

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¹ According to Donnellan (1977) the phrase 'whoever/whatever he/she/it is' can characteristically accompany definite descriptions when they are attributively used. Donnellan restricts himself to the discussion of utterances of the form *The F is G*.

particular individual in mind to whom she wishes to refer. The definite description 'Smith's murderer' is used referentially.

It is not clear whether Donnellan considers the referential/attributive distinction to be semantic or pragmatic in nature. On the one hand, he argues that this distinction has significant consequences for the truth conditions of a sentence. For example, if Smith was not murdered after all, then (1) on the attributive reading would have to be false, whereas on the referential reading it could be either true or false depending on whether Jones is insane or not. Such observations suggest that the referential/attributive distinction is semantic. On the other hand, Donnellan consistently talks of the two *uses* of definite descriptions and claims that it is unlikely that definite descriptions are syntactically or semantically ambiguous. Moreover, he says (1977: 59), in parentheses admittedly, 'perhaps we could say that the sentence is pragmatically ambiguous: the distinction between roles that the description plays is a function of the speaker's intentions'.

In this paper I first want to discuss whether the distinction between attributively and referentially used definite descriptions is a case of semantic ambiguity or pragmatic indeterminacy. I will take the position that the referential/attributive distinction lies in the area of pragmatics. I will also argue that the understanding of the referential use of definite descriptions as simply involving picking out the right referent is too narrow. Moreover, I will show that the pragmatic analyses proposed so far within the Gricean framework and the theory of Speech Acts are not adequate and that a more satisfactory account of the related problems can be given within relevance theory.

2. Why the referential/attributive distinction is not semantic

2.1. General considerations

If definite descriptions are ambiguous then the referential/attributive distinction as illustrated above amounts to there being two distinct *senses* rather than *uses* of definite descriptions. Kripke (1977) argues in a detailed and convincing way against this view. In the first part of this section I am going to present some of his arguments.

To choose between an analysis of definite descriptions in terms of a semantic ambiguity or in terms of a pragmatic indeterminacy Kripke proposes the following test. Let's make the hypothesis that there is a language

which is similar to English except that the truth conditions of sentences with definite descriptions are stipulated to coincide with Russell's: for example, 'the present king of France is bald' is to be true if and only if exactly one person is king of France and that person is bald. This Russell language (Kripke distinguishes three versions: the strong, the intermediate and the weak Russell language) is to be contrasted with what Kripke calls the D-language. In D-languages the referential/attributive distinction is semantic in nature and affects truth conditions. An unambiguous version of the D-language would be a language in which there are two different words for the definite article, say 'the' and 'ze', encoding respectively the attributive and the referential definite descriptions. The ambiguous version of the D-language has only one word 'the' which may be interpreted according to the semantics of 'the' or of 'ze'. The question now is, is English a Russell language or a D-language? Kripke shows that the referential/attributive distinction will arise in any of the Russell languages and could be accounted for pragmatically on the basis of the distinction between speaker's reference and semantic reference. Since Donnellan's distinction arises in the Russell languages, the fact that it arises in English provides no argument against the hypothesis that English is a Russell language. Moreover, Kripke continues (1977: 18), 'If Donnellan had possessed a clear intuition that 'Her husband is kind to her', uttered in reference to the kind lover of a woman married to a cruel husband, expressed literal truth, then he would have adduced a phenomenon that conforms to the ambiguous D-language but is incompatible with any Russell language. But Donnellan makes no such assertion: he cautiously, and correctly, confines himself to the weaker claim that the speaker spoke truly of the man to whom he referred. This weaker claim, we have seen, would hold for a speaker of a Russell language'. The conclusion that Kripke draws is that there is no evidence that English is the ambiguous D-language rather than a Russell language.

Kripke also argues that we could consult our linguistic intuitions independently of any empirical investigation. Do we intuitively expect to find languages that use two separate words for the two alleged senses? The answer seems to be no, thus supporting a unitary account.² A unitary account of the semantics of definite descriptions is further supported by the fact that the pragmatic machinery involved, i.e. the distinction between speaker's reference

² It turns out that in some languages the referential/attributive distinction is in fact grammatically marked in certain linguistic contexts by the presence of the subjunctive mood (Farkas 1985, Rivero 1975, Rouchota forthcoming). However, as Kripke (1977: 26, n. 29) points out this does not necessarily show that the referential/attributive distinction is semantic.

and semantic reference, is necessary for independent reasons, for example in order to account for mistaken uses of proper names.

An important problem that a semantic ambiguity based analysis faces, and which is not extensively discussed from this point of view in the literature, is that the referential/attributive distinction does not exhaust the possible uses-senses of definite descriptions. Donnellan himself points out one other use of definite descriptions. A characteristic property of definite descriptions used referentially or attributively is that they carry the presupposition (according to Russell) or implication (according to Strawson) of existence. In particular, an attributively used definite description carries the presupposition/implication that there exists something that uniquely fits that description. In the same vein, Donnellan argues (1977: 52–53, 56–58) that a referentially used definite description carries the implication/presupposition that there exists something to which the speaker can be said to have referred even if it doesn't fit the description. The definite descriptions in the following examples, however, do or may lack such a presupposition or implication:

- (2) The present king of France does not exist.
- (3) Tom believes that the director of the nuclear power station in Chalfy has hidden important documents from the government.
- (4) John hopes to see the unicorn by tomorrow.

(2) is given by Donnellan (1977: 45) as an example of a definite description which is not used either referentially or attributively. Similarly (3) may be uttered by someone who believes that there is no director of the nuclear power station in Chalfy; and (4) may be uttered by someone who doesn't believe that unicorns exist. Such examples suggest that if definite descriptions are semantically ambiguous then they are not two ways but at least three ways ambiguous.³

Definite descriptions have yet another use when found in predicates as in (5) below

- (5) Peter is the teacher of my son.

In (5) the definite description 'the teacher of my son' is not used either referentially or attributively. It is simply part of the whole predicate

³ Such examples, as I will argue in section 4.1, can be given a pragmatic explanation in terms of the notion of interpretive use as developed within relevance theory.

ascribing a particular property to Peter. So, on the semantic ambiguity based analysis one would have to stipulate one additional sense of definite descriptions.

Moreover, it seems that Donnellan's distinction does not apply exclusively to definite descriptions. Indefinite descriptions can also be used referentially or attributively as suggested by Hall-Partee (1972), Wilson (1978), Chastain (1975), etc. For example, consider:

(6) John married a girl his parents didn't approve of.

(6) has two interpretations: either John married a particular girl and his parents happen not to like her, or John married a girl such that his parents would not like her.

On the basis of such considerations a univocal semantic analysis for definite descriptions seems preferable. One could then try to account for their different uses pragmatically rather than to stipulate several related but different meanings. In this way, Modified Occam's Razor, 'senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity', will be preserved and already existing machinery, i.e. your favourite pragmatic theory, will be called upon to offer an explanatory account.

2.2. *Different truth conditions?*

Donnellan (1977) argues that attributive and referential definite descriptions contribute to the truth conditions of an utterance in different ways. This raises an important problem for any attempt to deal with the referential/attributive distinction within a pragmatic framework, of the Gricean tradition at least, since it is usually assumed, following Grice (1989) that pragmatically derived aspects of utterance interpretation do not contribute to the truth conditions of the proposition expressed by the utterance.

Let me take an example and discuss the truth conditions of utterances with definite descriptions in some detail. Suppose that the truth conditions for (7) below

(7) Her husband is kind to her.

are that this woman has a husband and that he is kind to her. Suppose further that both conditions are met. It follows straightforwardly that when the description 'her husband' is attributively used, (7) is true. Let us say now

that on a certain occasion (7) is used referentially to pick out a particular individual who happens in fact to be her husband. In this case (7) will be indisputably true. Suppose now that the man to whom the speaker wishes to refer with the definite description 'her husband', say X, is not her husband but her lover. She definitely hasn't failed to refer to this man but is (7) under these circumstances true or false? Donnellan (1977) and Searle (1979) take the position that (7) could still be true if it is the case that X is kind to her, it could also however be false if X is not kind to her. In other words, in the case of a referentially used definite description a simple subject-predicate sentence is true if the predicate is true of the intended referent even if the referent does not fit the description. Kripke, who is more inclined to take the speaker as having said 'her husband is kind to her' claims that what the speaker has said is false 'but the popularity of Donnellan's view has made [him] uncertain that this intuition should be pressed too far' (1977: 20).

Suppose now that the woman has a husband but he is not kind to her. In this case (7) will be false on the attributive reading of the definite description, i.e. 'her husband, whoever he is, is kind to her'. On the referential reading, on the other hand, the intuitions are again divided. Most people in the literature would say that (7) is true if X is kind to her and false if he is not.

Finally suppose that this woman is a widow. In this case (7) read attributively will be false. If, however, the definite description is used referentially, (7) is supposed again to be true if X is kind to this woman and false if he is not. A different view is held by Linsky in his paper 'Reference and referents', as quoted by Donnellan (1977: 60). Considering the same example, Linsky argues that in these circumstances the statement is neither true nor false.

Note that, in the way this example is set up, the cases where referential and attributive definite descriptions seem to make different contributions to the truth conditions of the utterance are cases where the speaker mistakenly uses a description that does not fit the individual to which she intends to refer. In such cases I think that the speaker is felt to have said something which is true and something else which is false. It is false that X is the woman's husband but it may be true that X is kind to her. The hearer will only notice that the speaker has said something false if he knows that the man in question is not the woman's husband and he will only react to the speaker's mistake if it is important for the purposes of the discourse. Kripke (1977: 14–15, 18) shows that a similar situation could arise with proper names. Suppose two people see Smith in the distance and mistake him for Jones. One of them may ask 'What is Jones doing?' and the other one could answer 'He's raking leaves'.

For both participants 'Jones' names exclusively Jones but they have both used the name 'Jones' on this occasion to refer to Smith. No one, however, as Kripke points out, would think of stipulating a semantic ambiguity on this basis. In general such mistaken uses do not reveal anything about the semantics of definite descriptions.

My opinion about the truth value of such utterances is that they are strictly speaking false. This, however, does not mean that definite descriptions are semantically ambiguous. The standard claim that different truth conditions mean different semantic representations has been criticised within relevance theory. On the relevance view there are two types of semantics: *linguistic semantics* which has to do with the mapping of linguistic expressions on to concepts and *real semantics* which assigns truth conditions to the proposition expressed by an utterance in a particular context. These two levels are mediated by pragmatic derivation of content. In this picture of semantics the possibility of referential and attributive definite descriptions contributing to the truth conditional content of utterances in different ways does not constitute evidence in favour of an analysis in terms of semantic ambiguity.⁴

Donnellan discusses another type of example where the description used does not fit the intended referent but succeeds in picking it out. In these examples certainly the speaker and maybe the hearer as well are aware that the description used does not apply to the individual to whom reference is being made. Donnellan uses the following example, which I have adapted slightly: The throne is occupied by a man that the speaker believes is a usurper; all his followers, however, believe that he is the king. If the speaker wants to say of this man that he is in the countinghouse, she may appropriately say 'The king is in the countinghouse'. The claim is that if this man is in the countinghouse then the proposition expressed by this utterance is true even though the speaker firmly believes that this man is not the king. Commenting on such examples, Kripke (1977: 24, n. 22) correctly argues that such referential uses in fact 'weaken even further the case for a semantic ambiguity as they shade into ironical and "inverted commas" cases'. In a later section I will show that the existence of such examples does not offer support to the semantic ambiguity thesis and that the interpretation of such examples does indeed involve pragmatic considerations similar to those involved in irony and 'inverted commas' uses.

⁴ For a similar view see Récanati (1989).

2.3. *What is the proposition expressed?*

The difficult issue of the truth conditions of utterances containing definite descriptions relates to another important question: What is the proposition expressed by an utterance containing a definite description such as (7)? The identification of the proposition expressed seems to be more problematic in the case of referentially used definite descriptions, so the discussion will focus on those.

In his original formulation of the referential/attribution distinction Donnellan (1977: 46) argued that in the attributive use a definite description is used 'essentially', in the sense that the speaker wishes to assert something about whatever or whoever fits that description. It follows that if a definite description is used attributively it contributes to the proposition expressed. In the referential use, on the other hand, the definite description is only a tool for doing a certain job, i.e. calling attention to a person or thing. When the definite description is used referentially, Donnellan (1977: 61–64) argues that 'it is not clear what is meant by the "statement"'. The problem is this. If the description does not fit the referent but the predicate is true of the referent then, according to Donnellan, we would like to hold that the speaker has said something true. This may be taken to suggest that it is only the speaker's referent that appears in the proposition expressed. To say, on the other hand, that, for example, the statement made in (7) is that her husband is kind to her is problematic, as we would then have to decide whether we ourselves are using the definite description attributively or referentially in reporting what the speaker said. So, Donnellan seems more inclined to say that the statement made by (7) with the definite description used referentially is 'X is kind to her', where X is the person referred to. This ties up with his claim that in the referential use the definite description is nothing but a device to enable the hearer to pick out the individual or thing that the speaker is talking about: a device that could be replaced by any other device which could do the same job.

In the same vein, Hall-Partee (1972: 418–421) argues that 'the prominence of one or the other reading appears to depend on the relation between the significance of the description used in the noun phrases and whatever else is asserted in the sentence'. So, for example, the definite description 'the back fence' in (8) is more likely to be interpreted as identifying or partially identifying an object, as 'its descriptive content bears no particularly strong semantic relation to the content of the rest of the sentence':

(8) We left the dog tied to the back fence.

(Hall-Partee 1972: 419)

In the non-referential use, on the other hand, 'the descriptive content is semantically significant as part of the content of the sentence'. For example, in (9)

(9) Since I heard that from a doctor, I'm inclined to take it seriously.

(Hall-Partee 1972: 419)

whatever it was that the speaker heard was something to which the special competence of doctors is relevant.

Similarly, Searle (1979) argues that in the referential use the descriptive content of the expression used is not part of the proposition expressed by the utterance unless it coincides with what he calls the 'primary aspect' under which reference is made. It is this primary aspect under which reference is made that is part of the proposition expressed and makes a contribution to the truth conditions. Similarly, Récanati (1989) in an altogether different framework argues that on the referential reading the proposition expressed is a singular one of the form *a is G* where *a* is the object that satisfies the descriptive content of the definite description. The descriptive content itself does not appear in the proposition expressed but rather functions as a contextual condition, i.e. as a condition which must be contextually satisfied for the sentence to express a definite proposition.

So the standard view seems to be that in the referential use the definite description does not contribute to the proposition expressed because (a) it does not contribute to the truth conditions of the utterance and (b) it is inessential, in the sense that its only function is to secure reference and could therefore be replaced by any other expression capable of picking out the right referent.

Consider, however, the following examples:

(10) The fat apple pie is sitting in his usual chair.

(11) I am going to sell this defective manual to the next daft old hen that appears today.

(12) Napoleon is in bed.

(13) Is the king in his countinghouse?

Suppose (10) is uttered by a waitress to refer playfully to a regular customer who happens to be fat, always asks for an apple pie and has a place where he

usually sits. Suppose that (11) is uttered by an angry salesman who has just dealt with an irritating customer and sees the next one approaching. (12) could be used by the doctors in a mental hospital to refer to a patient who is called Fordell and thinks he is Napoleon. (13), finally, is an example from Donnellan where the speaker uses the expression 'the king' to refer to the person that she considers to be a usurper. In this example the speaker conforms to the code other people are using to make sure that her question will be understood.

In all these examples the definite descriptions could be replaced by more 'accurate' ones. So,

- (14) The fat customer is sitting in his usual chair.
- (15) I am going to sell this defective manual to the next customer to appear.
- (16) Fordell is in bed.
- (17) Is the usurper in his countinghouse?

With the examples (14)–(17) the speaker will (everything else being equal) succeed in referring to the person referred to by the corresponding definite descriptions in examples (10)–(13). It is, however, clear that although reference is preserved the change of the definite description has not left the meaning conveyed by the utterance unaffected. So, (14) does not have the humorous effect of (10). (15) lacks the expression of anger, aggression, sarcasm characteristic of (11). (16) may be more difficult to process than (12) if Fordell is always referred to as Napoleon and no one remembers his real name any more. (17), lastly, may be incomprehensible if, for example, the usurper is the real king's twin brother and nobody has understood that the real king has disappeared. Alternatively, (17) may be inappropriate because it fails to serve the speaker's intentions: suppose the speaker wants to know whether the usurper is in the countinghouse because she intends to have him killed. If she utters (17) she will probably be arrested by the guards rather than get the information she wants.

These examples suggest that, contrary to what is usually assumed, the descriptive content of the definite description contributes to the information conveyed by an utterance with a referentially used definite description. In fact this seems to be correct not only for uses like those in (10)–(13), which one might claim are non-literal and therefore different, but also in indisputably literal cases. For example, consider the utterance in (18) below:

- (18) The notoriously moody tennis player gave signs of his bad temper when he threw his racquet at his opponent's head.

Say that (18) is uttered by a sports reporter commenting on McEnroe's behaviour during his last game. Of course the reporter could have referred to McEnroe as 'McEnroe' or 'the former Wimbledon champion' or 'the American' (suppose the other player is a Russian) etc. All these descriptions and many others would have ensured reference to the particular individual the speaker wishes to speak about. The descriptive content of the definite description 'the notoriously moody tennis player', however, not only serves to pick out the right individual, but also contributes to the effects achieved by (18) by alluding to the fact that there have been other occasions when McEnroe behaved inappropriately on court. This may be intended to communicate that the speaker disapproves of McEnroe, and perhaps of bad-tempered people in general, that he wants the regulations of the game to prevent such behaviour, that he wants players who behave in this way to be punished and so on. None of these assumptions would have been communicated as easily in this context by any of the other definite descriptions. It follows that the speaker has chosen this particular definite description to refer to McEnroe because she thought it to be the most efficient.

In view of such examples it seems implausible that in the referential use the definite description is not semantically significant. Such examples clearly show that the descriptive content of the definite description is part of the thought that the utterance purports to represent. This, moreover, casts doubt on the claim usually made (Donnellan 1977, Searle 1979, Récanati 1989) that a referentially used definite description does not contribute to the truth conditions of the utterance. I will take the position that it does.

So, my claim is that the proposition expressed by an utterance like (18), when the definite description is used referentially, is (19) below

- (19) The notoriously moody tennis player, X, gave signs of his bad temper when he threw his racquet at his opponent's head⁵

where X is McEnroe and where both the definite description and some representation of the person to whom it is used to refer appear.⁶ For (19)

⁵ This is a simplified version of the proposition expressed. According to Sperber and Wilson (1986), the proposition expressed by the utterance is semantically complete and therefore truth evaluable. So, for example, the proposition expressed by (18) would not contain pronouns but rather some representation of their referents.

⁶ An alternative way of presenting the proposition expressed is à la Wilson (to appear), 'the notoriously moody tennis player_x gave signs of his bad temper when he threw his racquet at his opponent's head'. I consider the two formulations to be equivalent.

to be true it must be the case that the notoriously moody tennis player and X are the same person and that this person gave signs of his bad temper when he threw his racquet at his opponent's head.⁷ Note that this formulation has the advantage that it captures the variable intuitions about truth values when the description is used referentially but inaccurately.

On the other hand, when the definite description 'the notoriously moody tennis player' is used attributively, the proposition expressed by (18) differs from (19) in that it does not involve an individual representation of the intended referent. In this case the proposition expressed is true if some individual compatible with the content of the definite description exhibited bad-tempered behaviour.

I have argued so far that there is good reason to believe that the descriptive content of a referentially used definite description may play a crucial role in communicating the speaker's thought. In a later section I will show that this is well justified in a theory of utterance interpretation like relevance theory, where the fundamental assumption is that every utterance creates an expectation that on a given interpretation it will achieve an adequate range of contextual effects for no unjustifiable expenditure of processing effort.

3. Pragmatic approaches

3.1. *The Gricean view*

In 'Vacuous names' (Grice 1969), Grice discusses Donnellan's distinction briefly and claims that it does not represent a difference in the meaning or sense which a definite description may have on different occasions.⁸ On the contrary, according to Grice, the truth conditions of definite descriptions, whether attributively or referentially used, are identical and given by a

⁷ The same truth-conditional specification is proposed by Wilson (1978).

⁸ A remark related to our discussion is to be found in 'Logic and conversation' (Grice 1989: 25) where Grice, defining the level of 'what is said' says: 'But for a full identification of what the speaker had said, one would need to know (a) the identity of X, (b) the time of utterance, and (c) the meaning, on the particular occasion of utterance, of the phrase *in the grip of a vice* [...]. This brief indication of my use of *say* leaves it open whether a man who says (today) *Harold Wilson is a great man* and another who says (also today) *The British Prime Minister is a great man* would, if each knew that the two singular terms had the same reference, have said the same thing'. Grice's comment here raises another issue, which I will not address in this paper, namely the semantic difference, if there is any, between proper names and referentially used definite descriptions.

Russellian account ('with suitable provision for unexpressed restrictions to cover cases in which, for example, someone uses the phrase 'the table' meaning thereby 'the table in this room', Grice 1969: 142).

Grice clearly views Donnellan's distinction as falling within the domain of pragmatics. Discussing the referential use of the example 'Jones' butler mixed up the hats and the coats', Grice (1969: 142) argues that 'if the speaker has used [referentially] a descriptive phrase (i.e. "Jones' butler") which in fact has no application, then what the speaker has *said* will, strictly speaking, be false ... but what he *meant* may be true (for example, that a certain particular individual [who is in fact Jones' gardener] mixed up the hats and coats)'. It seems that Grice takes the proposition that a certain individual mixed up the hats and the coats to be an implicature of the utterance 'Jones' butler mixed up the hats and coats'. Grice does not explain which of his maxims play a role in the derivation of such an implicature. The obvious candidate seems to be the least well defined of all the maxims, the maxim of relation. However, the claim that a speaker uttering 'Jones' butler mixed up the hats and the coats' intended to *imply* that a certain individual mixed up the hats and the coats seems counterintuitive to me. Moreover this claim does not seem to mesh with Grice's definition of 'what is said' (cf. fn. 8). Rather, the speaker intended to *say* something of a certain individual whom she (mistakenly in this case) believed to be Jones' butler. The characteristic property of definite descriptions referentially used is that they pick out a particular individual or object. What hearers are expected to do when processing a referentially used definite description is to fix the referent. This suggests that the referential use of definite descriptions is a case where the speaker must assign reference. Reference assignment is a contextually determined procedure which contributes to the level of 'what is said' rather than to the level of 'what is implicated'.

3.2. *The speech-act theory view*

Searle (1979) proposes an account of the two uses of definite descriptions within the theory of Speech Acts. In particular, he sees an analogy between the referential use of definite descriptions and his account of indirect speech acts. In the case of indirect speech acts, there is a distinction between the speaker's primary illocutionary act which is not literally expressed in his utterance and his secondary illocutionary act, which is literally expressed. The primary illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing the secondary illocutionary act. For example, by performing the secondary

speech act of asserting/saying 'you are standing on my foot' the speaker may be performing the primary speech act of indirectly requesting someone to get off her foot.

Now, a speaker may know of several aspects under which she can refer to a particular individual or thing, in which case she will use one that she supposes will enable the speaker to pick out the right referent. Any of these aspects will do so long as it enables the hearer to pick out the right individual or thing. In such cases, as in indirect speech acts, one means what one says but one means something more as well. So, when one says 'Smith's murderer' one means also: that man over there, Jones, the one accused of the crime, etc. Crucial to Searle's analysis is the following claim (1979: 195): '... in every "referential" use though the expression actually used may be false of the object referred to and thus the object does not satisfy the aspect under which it is referred to there must always be some other aspect under which the speaker could have referred to the object and which is satisfied by the object. Furthermore, this aspect is such that if nothing satisfies it the statement cannot be true'. He calls this the primary aspect, which is to be contrasted with the secondary aspect, i.e. the aspect that the speaker actually used. The secondary aspect, according to Searle, is such that the speaker utters it in an attempt to secure reference to the object that satisfies the primary aspect. Only the primary aspect is part of the truth conditions of the statement the speaker is attempting to make. Thus, 'just as in the indirect speech act cases one performs the primary illocutionary act by way of performing the literal secondary illocutionary act so in the referential use of definite descriptions one performs the act of referring to an object as satisfying the primary aspect by way of performing an act of reference expressing a secondary aspect' (Searle 1979: 197).

Searle's account of the referential use faces a number of essential problems. For example, if the speaker possesses several aspects under which she can refer to the object she wishes to talk about what determines the particular expression that she ends up using? As an answer to this, Searle says that the secondary aspect is such that the speaker believes it will ensure reference. But, as I suggested in section 2.3 very often the function of the descriptive content of the definite description is not only to ensure reference but also to constrain the interpretation process and to give rise to certain effects.

A closely related question is this: if in the referential use the speaker has several ways of referring to the referent, among which is the so-called primary aspect, why does she not use the primary aspect instead of any other? This would presumably make her utterance much easier to process. The only possible explanation that I can think of without rejecting Searle's theory is

that the speaker may be aware that this primary aspect may not be available to her hearer, but this surely covers only a few cases.

Moreover, Searle claims that in the case of the referential use the primary aspect is such that if nothing satisfies it the statement cannot be true. But if there is nothing to satisfy the primary aspect the definite description cannot be used referentially at all. For a definite description to be used referentially there must be an individual or object in the world to which the speaker intends to refer. So, if nothing satisfies the primary aspect the speaker has not just produced a false proposition, she has failed to refer altogether.⁹

According to Searle, in the attributive use the definite description uttered expresses the primary aspect under which reference is made. This is so for one of two reasons: either the speaker possesses only this aspect or, if she knows of more, only the one she uses fulfils the satisfaction conditions of the speech act she is performing. This brings us to an important question: when processing an utterance containing a definite description, how does the hearer know whether reference is made under the primary aspect or whether the uttered aspect is a secondary one intended to secure reference? Maybe Searle's idea is that processing an utterance with a definite description the hearer will first try to interpret it assuming that reference is made under the primary aspect, i.e. that the definite description is used attributively, in which case 'speaker meaning and sentence meaning are the same' (Searle 1979: 198). If this doesn't work then the hearer will assume that the expression the speaker uttered is really the secondary aspect and start looking for the real referent. But, under what circumstances would the attributive interpretation not be sufficient from the point of view of the hearer? Surely, the hearer will not always be able to know whether the expression the speaker used was the only one available to her or not. So this will not help him in interpreting the utterance. Searle's claim that the speaker will use the aspect which is relevant to the satisfaction conditions of the speech act performed seems to make sense.

In the next section I will discuss an alternative pragmatic account of the referential/attributive distinction based on relevance theoretic assumptions.

⁹ In fact, in 'Reference as a speech act' (Searle 1969: 72-96), Searle himself takes one of the axioms of reference to be 'whatever is referred to must exist'.

4. A relevance theoretic account

4.1. *Relevance and the referential use of definite descriptions*

I showed in section 2.3 that, contrary to what is commonly assumed, when definite descriptions are used to pick out a particular individual or thing they very rarely serve only that function. In this section I will show how the choice of a particular definite description to guide the assignment of reference is constrained by the principle of relevance and how the principle of relevance can also accommodate those cases where the definite description seems to function solely to pick out a specific referent.

Within relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986) it has been argued that words encode concepts. Concepts are psychological entities considered at a fairly abstract level and conceived of as consisting of a label or address with three entries: logical, encyclopaedic and lexical. According to Sperber and Wilson, when a concept appears in a logical form being processed, access is given to the various types of information stored in memory at that address. So, in processing a description like 'Smith's murderer', the hearer is given access to at least some of the information stored under the concepts 'Smith' and 'murderer'. On this view, the difference between the referential and the attributive use may be formulated as follows: when a definite description is interpreted as securing reference to a particular individual, the hearer gains access to an individual conceptual representation of the specific person or thing the speaker wishes to refer to with the definite description, as well as to the concepts encoded in the description. When a definite description is used attributively, on the other hand, the hearer gains access only to the concepts in the description.

Let me reconsider one of the examples mentioned earlier:

- (18) The notoriously moody tennis player gave signs of his bad temper when he threw his racquet at his opponent's head.

Utterances are processed in a context. For Sperber and Wilson (1986: 132-142) the context in which an utterance is processed is psychologically defined: it is understood as a set of assumptions that the individual holds and which are brought to bear on the interpretation of the utterance. Sperber and Wilson argue that the standard view that the context in which an utterance is processed is determined at the start of the act of utterance is not plausible. The context for the interpretation of an utterance is at least partly derivable

from accessing the concepts encoded by the words used in the utterance. So, at least some of the assumptions that play a role in the interpretation of an utterance may not be accessible prior to the act of utterance. Moreover, Sperber and Wilson argue that the context in which an utterance is processed is not given but chosen: on the relevance view the intended context is chosen by the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance, i.e. hearers select the context in which the utterance processed yields adequate contextual effects for no unjustifiable effort.

Bearing this in mind, let us trace the interpretation of (18) assuming that the definite description is used referentially. Decoding the first part of the utterance, i.e. the definite description 'the notoriously moody tennis player' the hearer will gain access to the corresponding concepts, i.e. he will gain access to the information stored under 'notoriously', 'moody', 'tennis', 'player'. According to Sperber and Wilson (1986) and Wilson (to appear), reference assignment involves the retrieval or construction of an appropriate conceptual representation, one that uniquely identifies the intended referent. This representation is part of the proposition expressed by the utterance. The encyclopaedic information stored under the concepts encoded in the expression 'the notoriously moody tennis player' helps the hearer to fix the intended referent. Assuming that (18) is part of a report on today's game of tennis between McEnroe and X and given that McEnroe is widely known for making trouble on court, the hearer will infer that the speaker intends to refer to McEnroe. The proposition expressed in this case will be 'The notoriously moody tennis player, John McEnroe, gave signs of his bad temper when he threw his racquet at his opponent's head'. This proposition is the most easily accessible one in the particular context that gives rise to enough contextual effects to be worth the hearer's attention. For example, given the appropriate contextual assumptions it may contextually imply that McEnroe should be banned from playing tennis, that such behaviour decreases the popularity of tennis, that McEnroe is arrogant, etc.

I have shown so far how in a straightforward case, where the intended referent fits the descriptive content of the definite description, the hearer identifies the individual about whom the speaker intends to talk. Reference assignment depends partly on the descriptive content of the definite description and is driven by the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance. What is important is that reference assignment, picking out the intended referent, is done in a particular way determined by the speaker's choice of the definite description.

So, the question is why does the speaker choose the particular definite description 'the notoriously moody tennis player'? Certainly there are other

ways, maybe even less costly ones, of referring to McEnroe, for example 'McEnroe', 'the American' (say X is Russian), 'the former Wimbledon champion' (say X has never played at Wimbledon), etc. Well, let us think again of one of the ways in which (18) could achieve relevance. When processed against the assumption in (20), (18) will give rise to the contextual implication in (21).

- (20) If tennis players repeatedly behave inappropriately on court, they should be banned from playing tennis.
 (21) McEnroe should be banned from playing tennis.

But how does this particular contextual assumption come to bear on the interpretation of the utterance? Processing the expression 'the notoriously moody tennis player', the hearer will not only uniquely identify McEnroe but also he will access several assumptions about notoriously moody tennis players such as, for example, that they upset their opponents and the public, that they are aggressive people, that they are not popular among their colleagues, and most likely that they repeatedly behave inappropriately on court (this is why they are 'notoriously moody'). This last assumption together with other contextual assumptions about punishing such behaviour will cause the hearer to hypothesise that assumption (20) may be part of the context in which the speaker intends (18) to be processed. On this analysis the first interpretation of (18) that comes to mind achieves an adequate range of effects, one of them being the contextual implication in (21), for no unjustifiable processing effort and could therefore be taken as the one intended by the speaker. So, the claim is that the descriptive content of the particular definite description that the speaker chose to use contributes to the interpretation process by giving access to part of the context in which the speaker intends the hearer to process her utterance. This is exactly why the speaker chose this description instead of any other.

Since, on the relevance view, speakers intend their utterances to cause enough changes to the hearer's representation of the world without causing unjustifiable expenditure of processing effort, one would expect that speakers would build up their utterances in such a way that the interpretation process is to some extent guided. One way of doing this is by making sure that the right context is accessed. To put it in other words, by using the particular definite description 'the notoriously moody tennis player' the speaker has already indicated the direction in which relevance is to be sought by providing the hearer with evidence that the context in which the utterance is

processed should contain assumptions about notoriously moody tennis players. So, the implication in (21) is one that the speaker has encouraged the hearer to derive.

On this analysis, it is easy to see why changing the definite description used in an utterance affects its import as shown in section 2.3. Different definite descriptions will give access to different concepts. Different concepts have different encyclopaedic entries and thus contribute to the creation of context in a different way. Consider, for example, (22) below:

- (22) McEnroe gave signs of his bad temper when he threw his racquet at his opponent's head.

Processing (22) the hearer will gain access to the concept encoded in the proper name 'McEnroe'. If he has ever heard about McEnroe he is very likely to find in the encyclopaedic entry stored information about McEnroe's bad behaviour on court. So, he may process (22) against a contextual assumption like (20) and derive an implication like the one in (21). The difference from (18) is that in (22) the speaker gives no clear indication in her utterance that this is the way she expects it to be interpreted, i.e. she does not encourage the hearer to process her utterance in the context of (20). Of course there might be other indications in the context that will lead the hearer to interpret (22) in this way. For example, the speaker may have said before uttering (22) that she believes that players who behave badly on court as often as McEnroe should be banned from the game. The point is that the speaker's utterance itself does not necessarily make it manifest that among the assumptions the speaker intended to communicate was an assumption about McEnroe's inappropriate behaviour, which is crucial to establish the relevance of the utterance.

Consider now (23),

- (23) The Wimbledon champion gave signs of his bad temper when he threw his racquet at his opponent's head.

Suppose that in the context in which (23) is being processed the description 'the Wimbledon champion' secures reference to McEnroe. Notice that the concepts encoded in this definite description do not directly give access to any assumptions about McEnroe's frequent inappropriate behaviour. Of course, the speaker accessing the assumption that the Wimbledon champion talked about here is McEnroe may access the concept 'McEnroe', which might

contain information about McEnroe's frequent tantrums during tennis matches. So, (23) could give rise to the contextual implication in (21), but it would do so in a way different from (18), i.e. by first giving access to encyclopaedic information stored under the concepts encoded in the definite description. So, the context built up by (23) will be larger than the one built up by (18) because it will also contain assumptions about Wimbledon champions. So, if (23) is intended to achieve relevance by giving rise to (21), then it is more costly to process than (18). According to the principle of relevance, if the speaker chooses to utter (23), then she does not only intend to imply (21) but she also wants to say something about McEnroe as a Wimbledon champion. For example, she may wish to make mutually manifest the assumption that Wimbledon champions are rich and therefore McEnroe is rich. Such considerations support the claim made earlier that the descriptive content of a referentially used definite description not only enables the hearer to identify the referent but may also contribute to the relevance of the utterance by helping the hearer to set up the right context.

Are there cases where the descriptive content of the definite description plays no other role than helping to identify the referent? Yes, there are. For example, consider (24):

(24) Give this paper to the man over there standing by the wall.

Among the set of assumptions that the speaker intends to communicate with (24) is that there is one particular man to whom this paper should be handed and this is the man standing by the wall. In such uses, definite descriptions behave very much like demonstratives. Compare:

(25) Give this paper to that man.

In such a case the speaker makes sure that the definite description she uses secures reference. That is, among all the possible ways of referring to a particular individual or thing, she will choose the one that she thinks will allow the hearer to pick out the intended referent most easily. Again, the interpretation of her utterance is driven by considerations of optimal relevance. Realising that the speaker's intention is to pick out a certain individual and no more than that, the hearer will assume that the stimulus the speaker is using is the most economical one, i.e. the one that will enable him to identify the referent with the least processing effort. It may be, of course, that the identifying description used by the speaker is not what one would think of as the

most economical one. For example, the definite description in (24) is quite long, thus requiring considerable effort in being recovered, and could in principle be replaced by a shorter and thus less costly one that would still uniquely pick out the right referent. One should bear in mind, however, that speakers will use the most economical stimulus available to them. So, the speaker may use a rather long or linguistically complex identifying expression if this is the only one she can think of as an efficient means of achieving her goal.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the identifying description may turn out not to be true of the individual or object it is aimed to pick out. For example, consider (26):

(26) The man drinking the martini looks miserable.

where the man the speaker intends to refer to is in fact drinking sparkling water. The proposition expressed by (26) on the referential reading, 'the man drinking the martini, X, looks miserable', will strictly speaking be false. However, the speaker has still used the description that she thought could best identify the person about whom she intended to talk. In this case the speaker has still successfully referred to the particular individual but without her knowing she has allowed herself and the hearer to draw certain conclusions on the basis of her utterance which do not hold. So, for example, the hearer may infer that this man is drinking because he is miserable. Under some circumstances the mistaken identifying expression will not affect the relevance of the utterance. For example, if both speaker and hearer are under the mistaken impression that this person is drinking martini. Alternatively, it may be the case that the hearer knows that the man talked about is not drinking martini. In this case the hearer may or may not react to the speaker's mistake. He may realise but decide to ignore the fact that the speaker has said something false, if this is irrelevant. On the other hand, if he is not prepared to leave the speaker with the erroneous belief that the man to whom reference is made is drinking a martini, probably because he realises that this may lead the speaker to make inaccurate assumptions about this person which the hearer considers relevant, then he will correct him. On this issue Wilson (1978: 71) says, 'Our inclinations in this matter [whether we point out to our speakers that they have said something false or not] seem to depend in a fairly loose manner on the focus and nature of the immediate conversational interest'. In relevance-theoretic terms I would say that our inclinations in this matter depend on our assumptions about the relevance of the propositions involved.

Such cases, where the definite description serves solely to secure reference, illustrate one type of referentially used definite descriptions. They are at the one end of the spectrum of the ways in which a speaker could make use of a referential definite description. Intermediate cases, where a definite description is used partly to secure reference and partly for other reasons, are illustrated by examples (18) and (23). At the other end of the spectrum, there are cases where securing reference is the least important of the speaker's intentions although still one of them. For example,

(10) The fat apple pie is sitting in his usual chair.

(27) Peter eventually married the free ticket to the opera.

(adapted from Sperber 1975: 411)

(28) The block of ice just left the room.

In examples like (10), (27) and (28) the choice of the particular definite description is certainly not aimed primarily at securing reference. It is of course important that the hearer realises about whom the speaker is talking, but it is more important that the hearer recovers the speaker's attitude towards the referent and this is the way in which the particular definite description contributes to the relevance of the whole utterance. The identification of the particular referent may be more costly, although not impossible as far as the speaker could foresee, but this extra processing effort is certainly rewarded by extra effects having to do with the expression of the speaker's attitude. There is clearly little doubt that the humorous flavour of (10) together with assumptions about how the person referred to looks and behaves, the implicit expression of contempt in (27) together with a bunch of assumptions about what kind of person Peter is, what kind of person his wife is and what sort of marriage they have, and finally the implicit expression of dislike in (28) together with several assumptions about the character of the person referred to are recovered at least partly on the basis of the way the particular definite descriptions guide the hearer to build the context in which to interpret the corresponding utterances.

The discussion so far suggests that the way in which a referent is picked out by a given description may vary. So, the description used may be true of the referent as in (18): McEnroe is the notoriously moody tennis player. A referent can be said to be picked out by a description when the speaker is mistaken in believing that it fits the description; for example, when the speaker mistakenly refers to the man drinking sparkling water as the man drinking the martini. Finally, a referent may be picked out by a description if

someone other than the speaker believes that the description is true of the referent. This last case is very interesting and I would like to say something more about it, although, needless to say, a full account of such examples lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Consider the following examples:

- (13) Is the king in his countinghouse?
- (12) Napoleon is in bed.
- (2) The present king of France does not exist.

In (13) the speaker believes that the man who acts like the king is in fact a usurper. She uses this description, however, to make sure that other people will understand her. In (12) the doctor refers to her patient as Napoleon because he (the patient) thinks he is Napoleon. In both these examples, in a way, the speaker is not responsible for the suitability of the description she is using. In fact the speaker is attributing the description itself to someone else. In the first example it may be crucial for the speaker's purposes that the hearer does not understand that she does not endorse the description 'the king'. In (12), on the other hand, part of the humorous tone arises when the hearer realises that it is the mentally disturbed patient rather than the speaker who would endorse the name 'Napoleon'. The most easily accessible context for (2), as far as I am concerned, is one where someone has just said something of the present king of France. Uttering (2) the speaker *mentions* rather than *uses* this description, i.e. she is attributing this description to the hearer and communicates by her utterance that she finds the use of this description wrong since there is no king of France at present.

In relevance theory a distinction is made between the *descriptive* and the *interpretive* dimensions of language and thought (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 224–231). An utterance or thought or any other representation with a propositional form is used descriptively when it represents a state of affairs in virtue of its propositional form being true of that state of affairs. A thought or utterance, however, can also represent another thought or utterance by virtue of a resemblance between the two propositional forms. A propositional form resembles another when they share logical and contextual implications. This is the variety of representation that Sperber and Wilson call interpretive.

One type of interpretive use is when an utterance is used interpretively to represent another utterance or thought which is attributed by the speaker to someone else. According to Sperber and Wilson this is crucially what happens in irony (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 237–243). I want to suggest that

although the utterances as a whole in (13), (12) and (2) are used descriptively, the definite descriptions themselves are used interpretively, i.e. the speaker herself only mentions them. She does not endorse these descriptions: rather she attributes them to someone else. In relevance theory terms these descriptions are used *attributively*, in a sense altogether different from Donnellan's. On this view, the proposition expressed by, for example, (12) will be something like (29) below:

(29) The person who calls himself 'Napoleon' is in bed.

At a more fundamental level, Sperber and Wilson argue that every utterance is an interpretation of a thought. In other words, the proposition expressed by an utterance is put forward as resembling a thought that the speaker intends to communicate. Metaphor is a figure of speech which exploits interpretation at this level (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 231–237). In using a metaphor the speaker intends to communicate a very complex thought. The metaphorical utterance is a stimulus which, although it only resembles the actual thought, is capable of communicating this thought easily, i.e. the assumptions that the speaker intends to communicate are all straightforwardly derivable from the metaphorical utterance. Now, I want to suggest that something similar goes on in the interpretation of sentences with definite descriptions, such as the ones given in (10), (27) and (28). With these utterances the speaker wants to communicate a complex thought. For example, in (10) the speaker using the definite description 'the fat apple pie' intends to make manifest a wide range of implicatures like 'this man is always eating apple pie', 'this man is so fat', 'he almost looks like an apple pie', 'the speaker doesn't like people who can't control their appetite' and so on.¹⁰

4.2. *Definite descriptions and explicit content*

In this section I will introduce the notion of *explicature* as developed within relevance theory and show its role in the interpretation of definite descriptions.

According to Sperber and Wilson (1986: 176–183), explicatures, i.e. explicitly communicated assumptions, differ from implicatures in that they are

¹⁰ The same analysis for examples similar to the ones discussed in the last part of this section is put forward and argued for in Sperber and Wilson (1983: sections 4 and 5, especially pp. 64–66 and Wilson (1991).

developments of a logical form encoded by the utterance. Implicatures, on the other hand, are independent propositions derived inferentially by the interaction between the information encoded by the utterance and contextual assumptions. The logical form of an utterance is the semantic representation assigned to it by the grammar and recovered in utterance interpretation by an automatic process of decoding. The claim is that the logical form of an utterance substantially underdetermines the proposition expressed by the utterance on a particular occasion. Explicatures, according to Wilson and Sperber (1990), are derived by inferential processes taking as input the semantic representation of the utterance and contextual assumptions and yielding as output a fully determinate propositional form. Contrary to the standard assumption according to which one should stop at the weakest propositional form which yields truth conditions, Carston (1988) argues that truth evaluability sets only the lower bound on the process of development. The upper bound is determined by the principle of relevance itself. So, on the relevance view, the hearer enriches the logical form of an utterance to the point where it expresses the minimal fully determinate propositional form which gives rise to adequate contextual effects without putting the hearer to unjustifiable expenditure of processing effort.

As I pointed out in the discussion of Grice's account (3.1), the referential use of definite descriptions is more naturally described as a case of assignment of reference rather than an implicature conveyed by the utterance. In this respect, referentially used definite descriptions behave in a way similar to pronouns and other referring expressions. Their referent is contextually specified and contributes to the proposition expressed. Pronouns differ crucially from referentially used definite descriptions in that they do not contribute to the conceptual information encoded in an utterance, as argued in Wilson and Sperber (1990) and Kempson (forthcoming). Rather, they constrain reference assignment by pointing out what properties a suitable referent should fulfil, for example, a pronoun like 'he' semantically encodes that the hearer should look for a referent which is male and singular. Definite descriptions, as argued in the last section, may be used to secure reference but even then encode conceptual information, i.e. they give access to certain concepts, they do not simply encode instructions as to how to identify a referent.

There seems to be little doubt that an individuating concept of the intended referent contributes to the proposition expressed by the utterance. This has a psychologically plausible explanation within the framework of relevance theory. On the relevance view, the hearer enriches the logical form encoded in

the utterance to the point where it expresses the minimal proposition that gives rise to adequate contextual effects to be worth the hearer's attention without putting him to unjustifiable processing effort. In the context given in the last section for (18), for example, the definite description has to be interpreted referentially in order for the overall interpretation of the utterance to achieve the level of optimal relevance. An interpretation on which the speaker is not talking about McEnroe but about 'the notoriously moody tennis player, whoever he is' is too weak in this context, i.e. it does not yield enough contextual effects for no unjustifiable processing effort. So, the proposition expressed has to be enriched into 'the notoriously moody tennis player, McEnroe, gave signs of his bad temper when he threw his racquet at his opponent's head', in order to yield an interpretation in accordance with the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance. It follows that an individuating representation of the intended referent should be part of the explicit content communicated by the utterance.

Récanati (1989), in a framework very similar to the one proposed within relevance theory, also argues that in the referential use of definite descriptions the intended referent contributes to the proposition expressed by the utterance.¹¹ Récanati argues that the linguistic meaning of definite descriptions is univocal and given by a Russellian account. On his analysis, this semantics is a proper truth condition when the definite description is interpreted attributively; it acts, however, as a contextual condition, i.e. a condition which must be contextually satisfied for the sentence to express a definite proposition, when the definite description is interpreted referentially. So, the proposition expressed by an utterance of the form 'the F is G', where 'the F' is a referentially used definite description, will be 'a is G'. In other words, the intended referent will appear in the proposition expressed but the definite description itself will not.

I have argued that the definite description itself does contribute to the proposition expressed by the utterance. A final consideration is this. Definite descriptions encode conceptual information and are therefore, according to

¹¹ Récanati argues that there are three different levels which should be taken into account in the interpretation of utterances with definite descriptions. The level of sentence meaning, or what he calls the diagonal proposition associated with the utterance; the level of what is said literally by uttering the sentence, or the proposition expressed; and lastly the level of what is communicated by uttering the sentence. This picture is similar to the one proposed within relevance theory. There are, however, a few important differences. For example, Récanati's diagonal proposition is truth evaluable whereas Sperber and Wilson's linguistic meaning is in general not semantically complete, i.e. not capable of being true or false.

Wilson and Sperber (1990), expected to contribute either to the proposition expressed by the utterance or to one of its higher level explicatures. On the relevance view, higher level explicatures are truth evaluable representations that the speaker intends to communicate explicitly and are formed by embedding the proposition expressed by the utterance under a propositional attitude or speech act verb. Sentence adverbs like 'seriously' and 'frankly' are examples of linguistic expressions which encode conceptual information and may contribute to one of the higher level explicatures communicated by the utterance. Definite descriptions, however, do not behave in a way similar to such adverbs. So, given the pragmatic machinery available, it seems that they contribute to the proposition expressed by the utterance.

In the remainder of this section I would like to show that whether a definite description is interpreted attributively or referentially depends on considerations of optimal relevance.

Let me assume for the sake of the argument that the linguistic meaning of definite descriptions is given by some version of Russell's theory (Russell 1905) capable of accounting for incomplete definite descriptions. My aim here is not to justify Russell's analysis but rather to show that given a univocal semantic analysis one can account pragmatically for the different uses of definite descriptions.

Let us start by considering again the case of Smith's murderer. Suppose that A and B come upon Smith foully murdered and because of the brutal nature of the crime A exclaims

(1) Smith's murderer is insane.

Linguistic decoding will result in an incomplete logical form which will give access to the concepts named in the utterance. Decoding the definite description at the beginning of the utterance, the hearer will recover that there is an *x* such that *x* murdered Smith and that this person is insane. Assumptions in the encyclopaedic entries for the concepts 'Smith' and 'murderer' will also become more accessible, some of them contributing to the relevance of the utterance. In the context given above the hearer will not try to identify a particular referent since the proposition expressed 'there is an *x* such that *x* is Smith's murderer and *x* is insane' is the minimal semantically complete, i.e. truth evaluable, representation which gives rise to enough contextual effects for no unjustifiable effort. For example, the information contained in (1) may combine with the hearer's assumption that insane murderers are difficult to catch, to contextually imply that Smith's murderer will be difficult to catch.

Alternatively, (1) may be providing further evidence for, and therefore strengthening, the hearer's assumption that whoever wanted to harm Smith was insane. The point is that in this context an interpretation which is in accordance with the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance is reached without enriching the semantics of the definite description. This is the interpretation, which being the most easily accessible, is the first that comes to mind and yields an adequate range of effects for no unjustifiable processing effort. So, the hearer can and should accept it as the one the speaker intended.

Notice that, for such an interpretation to arise, it is not necessary on this account that the speaker not know who Smith's murderer is. Suppose, for example, that A is a policewoman and that she knows Smith's murderer because he gave himself up after the crime. Suppose also that B is aware of this. Upon seeing the dead body A may still exclaim (1) without intending B to interpret the definite description referentially. The propositional form 'there is a unique x such that x murdered Smith and x is insane' may achieve optimal relevance by, for example, strengthening the hearer's existing belief that A thinks all murderers are insane. If this is the case, then the hearer will accept this interpretation and will not infer that the definite description was used to pick out the individual who committed the murder. In other words, how far the enrichment process will go is determined not by the information contained in the encyclopaedic entries for the related concepts but rather by the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance.

Suppose now that A and B know that Jones is Smith's murderer. After the trial, the conversation in (30) takes place:

- (30) A: I'd like to see Jones on my own.
 B: Are you crazy? Smith's murderer is insane.

In this context B's utterance makes sense only if it is interpreted referentially. A rational speaker could not have intended to communicate simply the truth evaluable representation 'there is an x such that x murdered Smith and x is insane' because on this interpretation her utterance is not in accordance with the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance. The hearer has good reason to assume that more inferential work on his part is needed. In accessing the encyclopaedic entries for the group of concepts expressed in the definite description, he will gain access to the assumption that Smith's murderer is Jones, thus gaining access to the concept labelled 'Jones'. So, the

proposition expressed by B's utterance on this occasion as constrained and enriched in its derivation by considerations of relevance is 'Smith's murderer, i.e. Jones, is insane'. The definite description not only guides the identification of the intended referent in this way but also contributes to the relevance of the utterance. By encouraging the hearer to access not only the concept for Jones but also the concept for Smith's murderer, the speaker is leading the hearer through a chain of thoughts along the lines that Jones has already committed one murder, he is therefore capable of committing another one, he is therefore dangerous, so it is better if B does not see him on his own.

Note that on the proposed analysis the attributive use of definite descriptions coincides with their linguistic semantics. On a non-Russellian account of the linguistic meaning of definite descriptions it may turn out that the attributive and the referential uses are the result of two distinct enrichments. One may put forward two arguments in favour of such a view. Firstly, it seems that the way in which we interpret a referentially used definite description is distinct from the way we interpret an attributively used definite description. In interpreting a referentially used definite description the hearer's concern is to pick out the intended referent, which he may then process in the context made accessible by the definite description itself. In interpreting an attributively used definite description the hearer will necessarily gain access to a context partly built by the descriptive content of the definite description.

A second argument could be constructed in connection with truth-conditional considerations. As I argued in section 2.2 an utterance containing a definite description may have different truth values depending on whether the definite description is used attributively or referentially. If this is the case, then it would be preferable to view the two uses as two distinct ways of enriching the semantics which could, therefore, yield propositions with different truth values. At the moment the problem with the view presented in the last two paragraphs, which is otherwise quite attractive, is the vagueness as to what the linguistic semantics of definite descriptions would be.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions is a matter of pragmatic indeterminacy rather than semantic ambiguity. I have also argued that the standard assumption that referentially used definite descriptions only serve to pick out a certain individual is not correct. Definite descriptions used to secure reference

rarely have only this purpose in communication. Usually, in addition to referring to a specific individual or thing, definite descriptions help the hearer build up the context in which the speaker intends her utterance to be interpreted and thus give rise to contextual effects which a different description would not. Moreover, I argued that the referential use of definite descriptions is best understood as a particular type of enrichment of the logical form encoded by the utterance and that considerations of optimal relevance will determine whether a definite description is interpreted referentially or attributively.

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