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**Reference and descriptions**

**Andrea Bianchi**

I am Andrea Bianchi, the author of the article you are reading. If I am telling the truth, as I invite you to believe, I am related in a peculiar way to two different expressions, a *proper name* (“Andrea”) and a *definite description* (“the author of the article you are reading”). Let us say that the name *refers to*, and the description, as used in this context, *describes*, or *denotes*, myself.[[1]](#footnote-1) But what exactly do the relations of referring and describing (denoting) consist in? The issue was, and still is, at the center of an intense debate in contemporary philosophy of language. As we shall see, different answers to this question reveal different understandings of how natural languages work.

**1. Do proper names describe?**

* 1. *Gottlob Frege*

The German mathematician Gottlob Frege is commonly acknowledged as the father of contemporary philosophy of language. In his very influential works, he treated proper names and definite descriptions on a par.

From a semantic point of view, according to Frege, there are three basic types of meaningful expressions: *sentences* (*Sätze*), *concept words* (*Begriffswörter*), and what he called “*Eigennamen*” (literally, “*proper names*”). Expressions of any of these types have a *sense* (*Sinn*) and, if not empty, what he called a “*Bedeutung*”.[[2]](#footnote-2) The *Bedeutung* of a sentence is a truth-value, that of a concept word is a concept, i.e., a function whose values are truth-values, and, finally, that of an *Eigenname* is an object. The sense, in each of the three cases, is a *mode of presentation* of the *Bedeutung*. Expressions with the same *Bedeutung* may have different senses. This is quite unobjectionable in the case of sentences, once it is assumed that they have as their *Bedeutung* one of the two truth-values. “Andrea Bianchi is from Venice” and “Gottlob Frege is German” are both true, but clearly differ in sense: they present the True, so to speak, in two different ways. Frege called the sense of a sentence “thought” (*Gedanke*). So, we may say that the two sentences express different thoughts. Given that surely no one would consider the two sentences as synonymous, identity of *Bedeutung*, while necessary, is not sufficient for synonymy; only identity of sense is. If two expressions have the same sense, they are cognitively equivalent: linguistic competence alone ensures that they do not have a different *Bedeutung*.

Now, let us have a look at the category of *Eigennamen*, which is the most interesting for our purposes. Frege does not characterize it from a syntactic point of view. He limits himself to saying that an *Eigenname* is an expression (which “can also consist of several words or other signs”) that “has as its *Bedeutung* a definite object (this word taken in the widest range), but not a concept or a relation” (Frege 1892a: 27).[[3]](#footnote-3) However, it is quite clear from his examples (“the point of intersection of *a* and *b*”, “Aristotle”, “the celestial body most distant from the Earth”, “the Moon”, and “Bucephalus”, just to mention some), that he considers both proper names and singular definite descriptions to be *Eigennamen*.

Of an *Eigenname*, be it a “word, sign, combination of signs, expression”, Frege writes that it “*expresses* its sense, *stands for* [*bedeutet*] or *designates* [*bezeichnet*] its *Bedeutung*”; and he adds that by “employing” it, “we express its sense and designate its *Bedeutung*” (31). So, to come back to our examples, it seems that in Frege’s opinion the proper name “Andrea” and the description “the author of the article you are reading” have the same kind of relation to myself. To use the terminology we introduced at the beginning, we may conclude that Frege did not distinguish referring and describing (denoting).

Well, then, but what does this relation consist in, according to him? To answer, we must take a closer look at the notion of sense. As we have already said, a sense is a mode of presentation of a *Bedeutung*; in this case, of the object that is referred to by “Andrea” and described by “the author of the article you are reading”. Furthermore, “[t]he sense of an *Eigenname* is grasped by everybody who is sufficiently familiar with the language or totality of designations to which it belongs” (27). Since our linguistic competence is insufficient to settle the truth value of “Andrea is the author of the article you are reading”, we must recognize that the name and the description have different senses (which, given the way the world is, ‘present’ or determine the same object, me). It remains to be seen, though, which these two senses are. The case of the description is easier: it wears its sense on its sleeve, so to speak. In fact, the expression is compound, and one of its constituents is a complex concept word, i.e., a *predicate* (“author of the article you are reading”), which individuates a condition (*authoring the article you are reading*). It is the fact that I am the unique satisfier of this condition that makes me the *Bedeutung* of the description. What does the real work here is, then, the *overt semantic structure* of the expression. If this is true, saying that the description expresses a sense, i.e., a mode of presentation, which presents an object (me), amounts to not much more than registering a triviality, namely that someone (in fact, me) is presented by the description *as* the one who authored the article you are reading.

Things become much more complicated when we come to proper names. The problem, obviously, is that they are not compound expressions: they do not have syntactic structure, hence they do not seem to have semantic structure. What is, then, the mode of presentation that they express? Frege was mainly interested in scientific languages, where proper names are not so common, so he did not discuss the issue extensively. However, in the few places where, quite incidentally, he did, his solution was overwhelmingly simple: they work precisely as descriptions. Indeed, they have a (covert) semantic structure identical to that of descriptions, and so, are associated with a condition whose unique satisfier is their *Bedeutung*. Here, for example, is a well-known passage:

In the case of an actual *Eigenname* such as ‘Aristotle’ opinions as to the sense may differ. It might, for instance, be taken to be the following: the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great. Anybody who does this will attach another sense to the sentence ‘Aristotle was born in Stagira’ than will someone who takes as the sense of the name: the teacher of Alexander the Great who was born in Stagira. So long as the *Bedeutung* remains the same, such variations of sense may be tolerated, although they are to be avoided in the theoretical structure of a demonstrative science and ought not to occur in a perfect language (27n; for similar considerations, see also Frege 1918-19: 65-6).

So, it seems that according to Frege for every proper name there is a description which expresses the same sense (even though we should perhaps relativize this to speakers). If this is true, the name (e.g., “Aristotle”), and the description (e.g., “the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great”) are synonymous (again, perhaps with the due relativization). The description wears the sense of the name on its sleeve. What makes it the case that “Aristotle” refers to Aristotle is the fact that Aristotle uniquely satisfies the condition individuated by the predicate occurring in “the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great”, namely that of *being a pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great*. In the end, we see that Frege thought that proper names refer *by describing*. The notion of reference is explained in terms of satisfying a condition.

Frege’s account of reference has been immensely popular. Moreover, after the Second World War Rudolf Carnap (1947) offered a framework for formal semantics that is congenial to it. To each expression of a language, compositionally, an *intension* and an *extension* are associated. Proper names and definite descriptions are treated on a par. In both cases, their extension is an object, while their intension can be seen as a function from possible worlds to objects. The intension ‘represents’ the meaning (the sense, in Frege’s terms) of the expression: what the “semantical rules” associate to the expression, and so “what is grasped by everybody who is sufficiently familiar with the language”. Given the way the world is, i.e., given the relevant non-linguistic facts (for example, that I, rather than someone else, authored the article you are reading), the intension determines an object (the extension of the expression), which is the one that the expression refers to. Again, reference is explained in terms of satisfying a condition.[[4]](#footnote-4)

* 1. *Bertrand Russell*

Contrary to Frege, Bertrand Russell clearly distinguished referring and describing (denoting): if an expression refers, it does not describe; if it describes, it does not refer. On the one hand, in an article whose importance in twentieth century philosophy can hardly be overrated, he offered an account of definite descriptions that is different from Frege’s in that it does not take them to be referential expressions (Russell 1905). We shall examine it in Section 2.1. On the other hand, he maintained that there would be no describing if there were no referring.

Russell’s reasoning can be reconstructed in the following way. In order for something to describe, it must have semantic (Russell would have said *logical*) structure, and in order for something to have semantic structure, there must be simple (i.e., unstructured) symbols that compose it. These simple symbols are what allow us to describe whatever we may want to describe. Now, what is important to notice is that they cannot but bear a relation to mundane entities (particulars as well as universals) which is radically different from that of describing (they do not have semantic structure!). They must simply *stand for* them. Among the simple symbols, Russell called those standing for particulars “proper names”.[[5]](#footnote-5) As far as I know, he did not use any special word for the relation they bear to the particulars they stand for, but I think it is fair to call it “reference”. If so, we have found something like a transcendental argument for the existence of referring, a relation different from that of describing (denoting). In short: in order for something to describe, something must refer; something describes; hence, something refers.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It remains to be seen what the relation of referring consists in. According to Russell, “it seems scarcely possible to believe that we can make a judgment or entertain a supposition without knowing what it is that we are judging or supposing about” (Russell 1911: 173). As a consequence, we can refer to something only if we know what it is: the relation of reference is epistemically constrained. Moreover, Russell thought that all kinds of knowledge may be accounted for in terms of knowledge by *acquaintance*, where acquaintance is a “direct cognitive relation” by which one is “directly aware” of the known entity (165). This is true, in particular, of knowledge by description: to know some object by description, one has to know by acquaintance the entities which are needed to describe it. This led Russell to defend what has been called “the Principle of Acquaintance”: “*Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted*” (173).[[7]](#footnote-7) Given that the constituents of a proposition are those which the simple symbols in the sentences that express it stand for, we must conclude that reference to something requires acquaintance with it: we may refer only to what we are directly aware of.

For reasons I shall not touch upon, Russell ended up believing that we cannot be acquainted with physical objects; the only particulars we may be acquainted with are sense-data. This has curious consequences for the issue of proper names. In fact, no actual proper name can be said to refer to a sense-datum—certainly, neither “Aristotle” nor “Andrea” do. If so, they are not simple symbols that refer to particulars. But then, what are they, and how do they work? Russell’s answer is surprising:

The names that we commonly use, like ‘Socrates’, are really abbreviations for descriptions …. A name, in the narrow logical sense of a word whose meaning is a particular, can only be applied to a particular with which the speaker is acquainted, because you cannot name anything you are not acquainted with…. We are not acquainted with Socrates, and therefore cannot name him. When we use the word ‘Socrates’, we are really using a description. Our thought may be rendered by some such phrase as, ‘The Master of Plato’, or ‘The philosopher who drank the hemlock’, or ‘The person whom logicians assert to be mortal’, but we certainly do not use the name as a name in the proper sense of the word (Russell 1918-19: 200-1).

Indeed, it is “very difficult to get any instance of a name at all in the proper strict logical sense of the word”: “[t]he only words one does use as names in the logical sense are words like ‘this’ or ‘that’ ”, since “[o]ne can use ‘this’ as a name to stand for a particular [an actual object of sense] with which one is acquainted at the moment” (201).

It is fair to say, then, that starting from a semantic framework quite different from that of Frege, driven by his epistemology Russell ended up making similar claims concerning actual proper names: for both of them, they describe, as definite descriptions do.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, whilst stressing this, one should not forget that they had very different ideas about what describing amounts to, as we shall see in Section 2.1.

* 1. *John Searle*

We have seen that according to Frege proper names are synonymous with definite descriptions, and according to Russell they are definite descriptions in disguise. In a short article published in 1958, John Searle distanced himself from them. Indeed, like Russell, he distinguished “the referring function from the describing function of language” (Searle 1958: 172). But he claimed, contrary to Russell, that actual proper names do refer, and, contrary to Frege, that while definite descriptions refer by describing, actual proper names refer in their own peculiar way. However, as we shall see, he still maintained that they have a strong logical connection to descriptions: referring somehow presupposes describing.

Searle’s starting point is an apparent tension (or, even, to use his word, a “paradox” (173)). On the one hand, he says, “we do not ordinarily think of proper names as having a sense at all in the way that predicates do; we do not, *e.g.* give definitions of proper names” (166). On the other hand, though,

let us ask how it comes about that we are able to refer to a particular object by using its name. How, for example, do we learn and teach the use of proper names? This seems quite simple—we identify the object, and, assuming that our student understands the general conventions governing proper names, we explain that this word is the name of that object. But unless our student already knows another proper name of the object, we can only *identify* the object (the necessary preliminary to teaching the name) by ostension or description; and, in both cases, we identify the object in virtue of certain of its characteristics. So now it seems as if the rules for a proper name must somehow be logically tied to particular characteristics of the object in such a way that the name has a sense as well as a reference; indeed, it seems it could not have a reference unless it did have a sense, for how, unless the name has a sense, is it to be correlated with the object? (167-8).

To solve the paradox, Searle looks for “the unique function of proper names in our language”:

To begin with, they mostly refer or purport to refer to particular objects; but of course other expressions, definite descriptions and demonstratives, perform this function as well. What then is the difference between proper names and other singular referring expressions? Unlike demonstratives, a proper name refers without presupposing any stage settings or any special contextual conditions surrounding the utterance of the expression. Unlike definite descriptions, they do not in general *specify* any characteristics at all of the objects to which they refer. “Scott” refers to the same object as does “the author of *Waverley*”, but “Scott” specifies none of its characteristics, whereas “the author of *Waverley*” refers only in virtue of the fact that it does specify a characteristic (170).

Hence, properly speaking, proper names do not describe. However, as anticipated, there is, even in the case of proper names, a close connection between referring and describing, according to Searle. Indeed, he writes,

as a proper name does not in general specify any characteristics of the object referred to, how then does it bring the reference off? How is a connection between name and object ever set up? This, which seems the crucial question, I want to answer by saying that though proper names do not normally assert or specify any characteristics, their referring uses nonetheless presuppose that the object to which they purport to refer has certain characteristics…. To use a proper name referringly is to presuppose the truth of certain uniquely referring descriptive statements, but it is not ordinarily to assert these statements or even to indicate which exactly are presupposed (170-1).[[9]](#footnote-9)

So, in conclusion, here is Searle’s solution of the paradox:

does a proper name have a sense? If this asks whether or not proper names are used to describe or specify characteristics of objects, the answer is “no”. But if it asks whether or not proper names are logically connected with characteristics of the object to which they refer, the answer is “yes, in a loose sort of way” (173).

But, loose as it may be, this would still be a way for proper names to have a (descriptive) sense. Thus, I think it is fair to conclude that even according to Searle the relation that a proper name bears to an object, if it refers to it, is mediated by some description. Basically, the idea that reference has to be explained in terms of satisfaction of a (perhaps only loosely individuated, and perhaps not part of what is asserted when the name is used) condition is not questioned by him.

* 1. *Taking stock*

Let us take stock. We have so far examined three historically important positions on our question. Notwithstanding certain considerable differences between them, concerning (actual) proper names Frege, Russell and Searle advanced *description theories*, as Saul Kripke has claimed (though with regard to Searle some caution is required): they all maintained that they are semantically equivalent to definite descriptions, or to clusters of definite descriptions.[[10]](#footnote-10) And, certainly, they all subscribed to what Keith Donnellan called the “principle of identifying descriptions”, according to which “[a] name is worthless without a backing of descriptions which can be produced on demand to explain the application”, where the backing “functions as the criterion for identifying the referent” (Donnellan 1970: 335). In Section 1.5 we shall consider some of the arguments that have been leveled against such theories and such a principle.

Concerning reference, Frege, Russell and Searle had different views. Russell saw it as a direct relation with a particular that is grounded in acquaintance, while Frege and, less neatly, Searle, explained it in terms of satisfying a condition. But, even here, there is an important aspect on which they converge. Indeed, they all assumed that reference is epistemically constrained: in order to refer, we have to have *cognitive command* of what we are referring to. Frege and, again less neatly, Searle, thought that this command consists in knowing a condition that is uniquely satisfied by the entity referred to, Russell that it consists in a direct awareness of it.

One way to make this point is to say, with Howard Wettstein, that they were all driven by the “intentionality intuition”, that is by “the traditional idea … that if one is to speak or think about a thing, one must possess a discriminating cognitive fix on the thing, that something about one’s cognitive state must distinguish the relevant item from everything else in the universe” (Wettstein 2004: 57).

Another way to make more or less the same point is to claim, with David Kaplan, that Frege’s, Russell’s and Searle’s are *subjectivist semantics*, at least insofar as proper names are concerned. According to a subjectivist semantics,

everyone runs their own language. When we speak, we *assign* meanings to our words; the words themselves do not *have* meanings. These assignments are, in theory, unconstrained (except by whatever limitations our epistemic situation places on what we can apprehend). In practice, it may be prudent to try to *coordinate* with the meanings others have assigned, but this is only a practical matter.

… Although the *entities* which serve as possible meanings may be regarded as objective, in the sense that the same possible meanings are accessible to more than one person, the *assignment* of meanings is subjective, and thus the *semantics* is subjective. Since each individual user must *assign* meanings rather than receiving them with the words, each user’s semantics is autonomous. What the language community does make available to each of its member is a syntax, an *empty* syntax to which each user must add his own semantics.

… In this sense there is no semantic sharing. What each user can express is independent of the resources of other members of the language community (Kaplan 1989b: 600-1).

Perhaps with less emphasis, the charge of subjectivism was made by Kripke as well:

The picture which leads to the cluster-of-descriptions theory is something like this: One is isolated in a room; the entire community of other speakers, everything else, could disappear; and one determines the reference for himself by saying—‘By “Gödel” I shall mean the man, whoever he is, who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic’ (Kripke 1972: 91).

As we shall soon see, this is by no means the only way of conceiving of semantics, and in particular of reference. Perhaps, the intentionality intuition is not so good as an intuition.

* 1. *Saul Kripke*

In the late Sixties and early Seventies, a powerful attack was launched, on various fronts, against traditional accounts of the working of natural languages. As we shall see in Section 2.3, Donnellan (1966) argued against them, and offered an alternative one, with regard to definite descriptions. Kripke (1972) and Hilary Putnam (1975a) did the same with regard to at least some general terms (terms for natural kinds, substances and artifacts, and theoretical terms), and Kaplan (1978 and 1989a) with regard to demonstratives and indexicals. Concerning proper names, Donnellan (1970) produced some counterexamples to the principle of identifying descriptions which we mentioned in Section 1.4. The result of all this was the emergence of something that has been called “new theory of reference” or “direct reference theory”. A major role here was undoubtedly played by a series of three lectures that Kripke gave at Princeton University in January 1970, which were subsequently published under the title of “Naming and Necessity”. There, among other things, Kripke offered devastating criticisms of description theories of proper names and a new picture of how these refer.

Before looking briefly at the criticisms, let us make one consequence of description theories of names explicit. If a name is synonymous with a definite description, or is an abbreviation of it, then certain sentences should turn out to be *analytically* true, hence *necessarily* and *a priori* true. The most obvious example is that of a conditional whose antecedent is an existential clause and the consequent a clause where the name precedes and the description follows the copula (“If N exists, then N is DD”).[[11]](#footnote-11) Even if one weakens the theory and limits oneself to saying that the description fixes the reference of the name, without giving its sense, i.e., without being synonymous with it, one is committed at least to saying that these sentences are a priori true.

Now, let us take a name and the description that is purportedly synonymous with it, or at least fixes its reference. For example, to stay with Frege: “Aristotle” and “the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great”. Is the sentence “If Aristotle exist(ed), Aristotle is (was) the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great” necessarily true? No, we should be ready to say: surely, Aristotle’s life might have been different, and he might not have studied with Plato, nor taught Alexander the Great. And is the sentence a priori true? Again, no: we know only a posteriori, if we know it at all, that Aristotle studied with Plato and taught Alexander. Indeed, we are all ready to admit that it would have been possible in principle to discover that he did not do any of this. But, if this is so, “Aristotle” and “the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great” are not synonymous, nor does the second fix the reference of the first.

We have just presented, in a nutshell, two of the three arguments that are usually ascribed to Kripke: the *modal* argument and the *epistemic* argument. Of course, we have only shown that “Aristotle” is not synonymous with, nor has its reference fixed by, “the pupil of Plato and teacher of Alexander the Great”, not that there is no definite description that is synonymous with it or at least fixes its reference. But the arguments may be repeated for many other descriptions (for example, for all those mentioned by Frege and Russell in the passages quoted). In fact, the modal argument is backed by something that is difficult to deny, that is that proper names and definite descriptions behave differently when modality is at stake: while a proper name is a *rigid designator*, in that it refers to the same individual with respect to any counterfactual situation (technically, a possible world), a description (but there are exceptions, which have sometimes been used to resist the argument) is not usually so, in that it describes different individuals with respect to different counterfactual situations. Just to give an example: while relative to the actual situation “the author of the article you are reading” describes who that “Andrea” refers to, relative to the counterfactual situation where Paolo rather than me wrote the article you are reading “Andrea” still refers to me but “the author of the article you are reading” describes Paolo.

The third and last of Kripke’s arguments is that *from ignorance and error* (sometimes also called *semantic* argument). It consists of two simple observations. First, sometimes we do refer to something by a proper name even though we are not able to associate to the name any condition that we believe to be uniquely satisfied by that something:

Consider Richard Feynman, to whom many of us are able to refer. He is a leading contemporary theoretical physicist. Everyone *here* (I’m sure!) can state the contents of one of Feynman’s theories so as to differentiate him from Gell-Mann. However, the man in the street, not possessing these abilities, may still use the name ‘Feynman’. When asked he will say: well he’s a physicist or something. He may not think that this picks out anyone uniquely. I still think he uses the name ‘Feynman’ as a name for Feynman (Kripke 1972: 81; for a similar observation, see Donnellan 1970: 343).

Second, sometimes we do refer to something by a proper name even though we only associate to the name a condition that is uniquely satisfied by something else:

In the case of Gödel that’s practically the only thing many people have heard about him—that he discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic. Does it follow that whoever discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic is the referent of ‘Gödel’?

Imagine the following blatantly fictional situation…. Suppose that Gödel was not in fact the author of this theorem. A man named ‘Schmidt’ whose body was found in Vienna under mysterious circumstances many years ago, actually did the work in question. His friend Gödel somehow got hold of the manuscript and it was thereafter attributed to Gödel…. So, since the man who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic is in fact Schmidt, we, when we talk about ‘Gödel’, are in fact always referring to Schmidt. But it seems to me that we are not. We simply are not (Kripke 1972: 83-4; see also Donnellan 1970: 347-9).

These two observations are extremely powerful. They can be seen as counterexamples to the principle of identifying descriptions, and suggest that proper names do not refer by describing: what makes it the case that “Feynman” refers to Feynman and “Gödel” to Gödel is not the fact that Feynman and Gödel uniquely satisfy a condition that is somehow associated with their name. Moreover, the two observations show that the intentionality intuition is not a good intuition, and that subjectivist semantics is not good semantics.

But what, then, makes it the case that “Feynman” refers to Feynman, “Gödel” to Gödel, or, for that matter, “Andrea” to me? Here is Kripke’s answer:

Someone, let’s say, a baby, is born; his parents call him by a certain name. They talk about him to their friends. Other people meet him. Through various sorts of talk the name is spread from link to link as if by a chain. A speaker who is on the far end of this chain, who has heard about, say Richard Feynman, in the market place or elsewhere, may be referring to Richard Feynman even though he can’t remember from whom he first heard of Feynman or from whom he ever heard of Feynman. He knows that Feynman is a famous physicist. A certain passage of communication reaching ultimately to the man himself does reach the speaker. He then is referring to Feynman even though he can’t identify him uniquely. He doesn’t know what a Feynman diagram is, he doesn’t know what the Feynman theory of pair production and annihilation is. Not only that: he’d have trouble distinguishing between Gell-Mann and Feynman. So he doesn’t have to know these things, but, instead, a chain of communication going back to Feynman himself has been established, by virtue of his membership in a community which passed the name on from link to link, not by a ceremony that he makes in private in his study: ‘By “Feynman” I shall mean the man who did such and such and such and such’ (Kripke 1972: 91-2).

This may seem naïve, and certainly there are details to be fixed. Indeed, Kripke’s aim is to offer not a new theory, but only “a *better picture* than the picture presented by the received views” (93), “a picture which, if more details were to be filled in, might be refined so as to give more exact conditions for reference to take place” (94). Actually, it is not so easy to fill in all the details, and it must be admitted that even today, forty years later, we do not possess a fully blown theory built on this picture.[[12]](#footnote-12) But, as a picture, it is certainly very attractive. What makes it the case that a proper name that we use refers to something is just that it was introduced, it does not matter where and when, for that something, and, “from link to link”, reached us who are using it. We can say, then, that according to the picture that Kripke offered and many others have tried to develop, reference, at least when proper names are concerned, is basically a *historical* relation, which usually originates in a *dubbing*.[[13]](#footnote-13)

A way to contrast Kripke’s picture with Frege’s, Russell’s and Searle’s is to claim, again with Kaplan, that his is a *consumerist semantics*, at least insofar as proper names are concerned. According to a consumerist semantics,

we are, for the most part, language *consumers*. Words come to us prepackaged with a semantic value. If we are to use *those words*, the words we have received, the words of our linguistic community, then we must defer to *their* meaning (Kaplan 1989b: 602).

Finally, what about the intentionality intuition? To it, Wettstein (2004: 75) opposes a “motto”, “Linguistic Contact Without Cognitive Contact”. This is perhaps too strong, because one may reject the intentionality intuition but claim (as I did in Bianchi 2005 and 2007) that words themselves put us in cognitive contact with things. But if we replace it with this other, “Linguistic Contact Without Cognitive Command”, then it is fair to say that Kripke showed that it might well be true. If he is right, to refer to something we do not need to have cognitive command of what we are referring to: acquiring a name that was introduced for it is enough.

**2. Do definite descriptions refer?**

*2.1 Russell again*

We have seen (Section 1.1) that Frege took definite descriptions to be *Eigennamen*, i.e., expressions having as their *Bedeutung* a definite object. In doing this, he treated them differently from indefinite descriptions (“an author”) and quantificational phrases (“some authors”, “all authors”), whose *Bedeutung* is, in his account, a second-level concept, i.e., a function from concepts to truth-values (see Frege 1892b). On the contrary, Russell (1905) offered a uniform analysis of all these “denoting phrases”:[[14]](#footnote-14) they all are incomplete symbols that do not have “any meaning in isolation” (480) but make the sentences in which they occur express a general proposition, i.e., a proposition that does not depend for its existence on the existence of, and so is not about, any particular object described by them.

To understand Russell’s point, consider first quantificational phrases, such as those which occur in (1) and (2):

1. All authors are male.
2. Some authors are male.

As is well known, their paraphrases in a first-order language are respectively (3) and (4):

1. ∀*x*(*Author x* → *Male x*).
2. ∃*x*(*Author x* ∧ *Male x*).

Russell, like Frege, believed that (3) and (4) reveal the *logical forms* of (1) and (2): they show what their *truth-conditions* are.

Now, note that no constituent of (3) and (4) can be seen as paraphrasing the denoting phrases in (1) (“all authors”) and (2) (“some authors”). This is basically what Russell wanted to direct our attention to when he claimed that denoting phrases have no meaning in isolation. In fact, (3) and (4), the *analyses* of (1) and (2), are constituted by a quantifier and an open formula. The open formula individuates a condition (in Russell’s terminology, a *propositional function*, i.e., a function from individuals to propositions). When a quantifier is prefixed to it, something is said about the condition itself: in the case of the universal quantifier, that the condition is always true (i.e., true for all values of *x*); in the case of the existential one, that the condition is sometimes true (i.e., true for some values of *x*). No particular object is mentioned in (3) and (4), hence in (1) and (2): all these sentences express general propositions.

Russell extended this account to indefinite descriptions, as Frege had already done. Indeed, he claimed,

1. An author is male,

is equivalent to (2), and so, its logical form and truth-conditions are given by (4).[[15]](#footnote-15)

But what about singular definite descriptions and sentences containing them, as (6)?

1. The author of this is male.

Here, as anticipated, Russell’s and Frege’s ways part. The latter assimilated (6) to (7):

1. Andrea is male.

In fact, according to Frege, “the author of this” and “Andrea” have the same object, me, as their *Bedeutung* (though they may well have different senses, as we have seen): by uttering (6) and (7) I refer to myself and ascribe to myself the property of being male; my assertion is in both cases *about* a particular object, which is determined by the sense of the name or the description. On the contrary, according to Russell, (6) is existential in form, just as (5), the only difference being that the definite article “involves uniqueness” (481).[[16]](#footnote-16) Indeed, (6)’s truth-conditions are shown by (8):

1. ∃*x*(*x Authored this* ∧∀*y*(*y Authored this* → *y* = *x*)∧ *Male x*),

where the universally quantified clause expresses the uniqueness requirement (no more than one individual authored the article you are reading). Like (4), (8) is constituted by an open formula, which individuates a (quite complex) condition or propositional function (*being that who is male and uniquely authored this*), to which an existential quantifier is prefixed, to the effect that of the condition it is said that it is sometimes true (i.e., true for some values of *x*). Given that the condition has uniqueness built into it, if it is sometimes true, it is true of exactly one value of *x*, namely of exactly one individual. If no individual authored this, or more than one individual authored it, or the only individual that authored it is not male, (8), i.e., (6), is false. We see, then, that according to Russell by uttering (6) I do not refer and ascribe maleness to myself; that my assertion is not about me, but about a condition; and that what I assert is not something particular, that is that a particular individual, *me*, is male, but something general, that is that one and only one individual authored this and this individual (*whoever he or she is*) is male.

Now, if there is one and only one individual that authored this, no matter whether male or not, there is still a sense in which the definite description occurring in an utterance of (6) bears the relation of describing to a particular individual, in fact, me, as Russell recognizes:

Every proposition in which “the author of *Waverley*” occurs being explained as above, the proposition “Scott was the author of *Waverley*” (*i.e.* “Scott was identical with the author of *Waverley*”) becomes “One and only one entity wrote *Waverley*, and Scott was identical with that one”; or, reverting to the wholly explicit form: “It is not always false of *x* that *x* wrote *Waverley*, that it is always true of *y* that if *y* wrote *Waverley* *y* is identical with *x*, and that Scott is identical with *x*”. Thus if “C” is a denoting phrase, it may happen that there is one entity *x* (there cannot be more than one) for which the proposition “*x* is identical with C” is true, this proposition being interpreted as above. We may then say that the entity *x* is the denotation of the phrase “C”. Thus Scott is the denotation of “the author of *Waverley*” (488).

Note, however, that the relation of denotation is of no semantic import. In fact, according to Russell’s analysis, by uttering (6) we would not say anything different if “the author of this” denoted someone else, e.g., Paolo, or even if it did not denote anyone (which would happen if no individual existed who authored this, or if there existed more than one). As a consequence, “we must abandon the view that the denotation is what is concerned in propositions which contain denoting phrases” (484).

To show the fertility of his theory, Russell tested it against some logical puzzles, which “serve much the same purpose as is served by experiments in physical science” (485). In particular, he dealt with the problem of true negative existential sentences containing definite descriptions (e.g., “the revolution of the sun round the earth does not exist”), and with that of the apparent violation of Leibniz’s law because of the non substitutability *salva veritate* of a definite description denoting a particular individual (e.g., “the author of the article you are reading”) with a proper name referring to him (“Andrea”) in certain linguistic contexts.[[17]](#footnote-17) His solutions, which we cannot examine here, are extremely elegant and powerful.[[18]](#footnote-18) This is, probably, one of the main reasons why Russell’s theory soon came to be considered a “paradigm” of philosophy. After more than a century, although serious criticisms have been leveled against it and alternative accounts have been offered (see Sections 2.2 and 2.3) the theory is still mainstream. To recap, according to this theory, definite descriptions are not referential expressions: even when they describe something, they do not refer to it. Indeed, the sentences where they occur are general (existentially quantified) rather than about any particular individual that may happen to be denoted by the descriptions in them.

*2.2 Peter Strawson*

In an article published in 1950, Peter Strawson set out to show that Russell’s theory of descriptions “embodies some fundamental mistakes” (Strawson 1950: 2).[[19]](#footnote-19)

We started our investigation on reference by saying that proper names refer; that is, we took reference as a relation that certain kinds of expressions (e.g., “Andrea”) bear to objects (e.g., me), though sometimes we have also said that people refer by using certain kinds of expressions. This way of putting things is common to all the philosophers we have considered so far, and seems to be harmless, even if some caution is required in dealing with indexical expressions (e.g., “I”, “this”). However, according to Strawson, this is already a mistake: “ ‘Mentioning’, or ‘referring’, is not something an expression does; it is something that someone can use an expression to do” (Strawson 1950: 6). We shall come back to this general issue in Section 3. As a consequence of this, Strawson distinguishes meaning and reference. In fact, meaning is something that expressions themselves possess. Hence, “[t]he meaning of an expression cannot be identified with the object it is used, on a particular occasion, to refer to” (7). On the contrary, “to talk about the meaning of an expression … is … to talk … about the rules, habits, conventions governing its correct use, on all occasions”. And, in particular, “to give the meaning of an expression [which has a uniquely referring use] is to give *general directions* for its use to refer to or mention particular objects or persons”.

Having said this, let us have a look at the expressions which, according to Strawson, have a uniquely referring use. Here is the very first paragraph of his article:

We very commonly use expressions of certain kinds to mention or refer to some individual person or single object or particular event or place or process, in the course of doing what we should normally describe as making a statement about that person, object, place, event, or process. I shall call this way of using expressions the ‘uniquely referring use’. The classes of expressions which are most commonly used in this way are: singular demonstrative pronouns (‘this’ and ‘that’); proper names (e.g. ‘Venice’, ‘Napoleon’, ‘John’); singular personal and impersonal pronouns (‘he’, ‘she’, ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘it’); and phrases beginning with the definite article followed by a noun, qualified or unqualified, in the singular (e.g. ‘the table’, ‘the old man’, ‘the king of France’). Any expression of any of these classes can occur as the subject of what would traditionally be regarded as a singular subject-predicate sentence; and would, so occurring, exemplify the use I wish to discuss (1).

Strawson’s list of expressions is quite similar to those which Frege and Searle had in mind. In particular, for Strawson too both proper names and definite descriptions may be used to refer. So, with regard to definite descriptions, Strawson’s position is very different from that of Russell, according to whom they are used to assert the existence of something satisfying some condition with uniqueness built into it. This does not mean that the existence and uniqueness requirements play no role in Strawson’s account. Indeed, when we use a definite description to refer to something, we presuppose that there exists some thing, and no more than one thing, to which we are referring. But we are not asserting what we are presupposing; on the contrary, we are referring to something, by using a significant expression, to assert something *about* it.

The difference between Strawson’s account and Russell’s becomes evident when a definite description happens not to (be used to) describe anything, as in (a use by me of) “The king of France is bald”. According to Russell, as we have seen, in such a case we should say that the sentence is false. Instead, for Strawson, as for Frege, in using the sentence I say something which lacks a truth-value, because what I presuppose when using it is not the case:

when we utter the sentence without in fact mentioning anybody by the use of the phrase, ‘The king of France’, the sentence does not cease to be significant: we simply *fail* to say anything true or false because we simply fail to mention anybody by this particular use of that perfectly significant phrase. It is, if you like, a spurious use of the sentence, and a spurious use of the expression; though we may (or may not) mistakenly think it a genuine use (9-10).

It remains to be seen what, according to Strawson, makes it the case that, when we use a definite description to refer to something, we do refer to it. Strawson does not address this issue directly. However, he writes:

In the case of phrases of the form ‘the so-and-so’ used referringly, the use of ‘the’ together with the position of the phrase in the sentence (i.e. at the beginning, or following a transitive verb or preposition) acts as a signal *that* a unique reference is being made; and the following noun, or noun and adjective, together with the context of utterance, shows *what* unique reference is being made (16).

The last sentence of this passage strongly suggests that Strawson thinks that what a definite description refers to is determined by the condition individuated by the predicate following the article. If this is so, his account of reference ends by being quite similar to that of Frege, at least as far as definite descriptions are concerned: by using them, we refer by describing, in that the entity referred to, if any, is that described by the description. However, Strawson introduces an important element of novelty: in many cases, the *context of utterance* is seen to play a major role. Indeed, quite often the condition individuated by the predicate occurring in the description is insufficient to determine a unique reference. Consider, for example, the sentence “The table is covered with books”. According to Strawson, “[i]t is quite certain that in any normal use of this sentence the expression ‘the table’ would be used to make a unique reference, i.e. to refer to some one table” (11). But it is even more certain that the condition of *being a table* is satisfied by more than one entity. How is it, then, that by using the description we succeed in referring to something in particular? Here, the context in which the sentence is uttered cooperates with the predicate occurring in the description to select a specific table: the one which is somehow salient in the context itself.

Even if one doubts Strawson’s positive account, it is generally agreed that the phenomenon Strawson put his finger on in his last example, that of the quite widespread use of incomplete (also called “ambiguous” (Devitt 1974: 195), “improper” (Kripke 1977: 255), “imperfect” (Devitt 1981: 517), “indefinite” (Donnellan 1968: 204n)) definite descriptions, is difficult to accommodate in Russell’s theory. Kripke, for example, whose defense of it against Donnellan’s criticisms we shall briefly mention in Section 3, writes:

If I were to be asked for a tentative stab about Russell, I would say that although his theory does a far better job of handling ordinary discourse than many have thought, and although many popular arguments against it are inconclusive, probably it ultimately fails. The considerations I have in mind have to do with the existence of “improper” definite descriptions, such as “the table,” where uniquely specifying conditions are not contained in the description itself. Contrary to the Russellian picture, I doubt that such descriptions can always be regarded as elliptical with some uniquely specifying conditions added (Kripke 1977: 255).[[20]](#footnote-20)

*2.3 Keith Donnellan*

In 1966, Donnellan published an article where he argued against both Russell and Strawson. Neither of them, in fact, realized that definite descriptions have two distinct functions or uses, which Donnellan calls the *attributive* and the *referential*. According to him, “one or the other of the two views, Russell’s or Strawson’s, may be correct about the nonreferential [i.e., attributive] use of definite descriptions, but neither fits the referential use” (Donnellan 1966: 283).

Here is how Donnellan characterizes the two uses:

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. In the first case the definite description might be said to occur essentially, for the speaker wishes to assert something about whatever or whoever fits that description; but in the referential use the definite description is merely one tool for doing a certain job—calling attention to a person or thing—and in general any other device for doing the same job, another description or a name, would do as well. In the attributive use, the attribute of being the so-and-so is all important, while it is not in the referential use (285).

Donnellan illustrates the distinction with an example:

consider the sentence, “Smith’s murderer is insane”. Suppose first that we come upon poor Smith foully murdered. From the brutal manner of the killing and the fact that Smith was the most lovable person in the world, we might exclaim, “Smith’s murderer is insane”. I will assume, to make it a simpler case, that in a quite ordinary sense we do not know who murdered Smith (though this is not in the end essential to the case). This, I shall say, is an attributive use of the definite description.

The contrast with such a use of the sentence is one of those situations in which we expect and intend our audience to realize whom we have in mind when we speak of Smith’s murderer and, most importantly, to know that it is this person about whom we are going to say something.

For example, suppose that Jones has been charged with Smith’s murder and has been placed on trial. Imagine that there is a discussion of Jones’s odd behavior at his trial. We might sum up our impression of his behavior by saying, “Smith’s murderer is insane”. If someone asks to whom we are referring, by using this description, the answer here is “Jones”. This, I shall say, is a referential use of the definite description (285-6).

Now, it is quite clear that Russell did not consider Donnellan’s referential uses, or at least did not take them as semantically relevant: according to him, as we have seen, by using a sentence containing a definite description we express a general proposition, and we do not say anything *about* any particular object or person that may happen to be denoted by the description in it. But, one may ask, why did Donnellan claim that Strawson did not account for them either? Didn’t Strawson (or, for that matter, Frege) point out, as opposed to Russell, that by using a definite description, we standardly *refer* to a particular object or person *about* which we assert something? Donnellan’s answer is that Strawson failed to realize that when a description is used referentially, what it refers to is not determined by the condition individuated by the predicate occurring in it. Indeed, when the condition is made to play this determinative role, the description can be used, at most, to talk about whatever fits it (in the context of utterance), rather than the particular the speaker wishes to talk about, and so, is used attributively.

To develop this point and contrast vividly Russell’s, Strawson’s and Donnellan’s views, let us go back to the discussion of Jones’s odd behavior at his trial. Let us suppose that Jones is actually insane, as is manifested by his behavior, but that he is not Smith’s murderer. In situation *a*, Smith was murdered by Adams, a very astute and not at all insane criminal who has not been exposed. In situation *b*, he was not murdered at all (because, let us say, he committed suicide). Now, let us ask: Would we say something true or something false if we uttered “Smith’s murderer is insane” in one of the two situations? According to Russell, we would say something false on both occasions, because either there would be no one who murdered Smith (situation *b*), or the person who murdered Smith (in fact, Adams) would not be insane (situation *a*). According to Strawson, we would say something false in situation *a*, because the person we referred to by our use, that is the one (Adams again) who satisfied the condition individuated by the predicate occurring in the description, *murdering Smith*, would not be insane; and we would say something that would be neither true nor false in situation *b*, because our use would, in his terminology, be spurious (even though we would think it genuine)—we would not be referring to anyone, given that no one would satisfy the condition. According to Donnellan, on the contrary, we would say something true both in situation *a* and in situation *b*, because the person we want to talk about and, in fact, succeed in talking about, *Jones*, is precisely as we stated, *insane*. Indeed, “the description is here merely a device for getting one’s audience to pick out or think of the thing to be spoken about, a device which may serve its function even if the description is incorrect” (303-4); and this is so because “in the referential use as opposed to the attributive, there is a *right* thing to be picked out by the audience and it being the right thing is not simply a function of its fitting the description” (304).

To sum up, a definite description in referential use may refer to something while describing something else (situation *a*) or nothing at all (situation *b*). If this is true, we cannot but conclude, first, that referring and describing are different relations, and, second, that not only proper names, as Kripke has shown (see Section 1.5), but also definite descriptions do not refer by describing: once again, the notion of reference cannot be explained in terms of satisfying a condition. As for the first point, Donnellan is quite explicit:

Russell’s definition of denoting (a definite description denotes an entity if that entity fits the description uniquely) is clearly applicable to either use of definite descriptions. Thus whether or not a definite description is used referentially or attributively, it may have a denotation. Hence, denoting and referring, as I have explicated the latter notion, are distinct and Russell’s view recognizes only the former. It seems to me, moreover, that this is a welcome result, that denoting and referring should not be confused (293).

Indeed, definite descriptions in referential use seem to be more akin to Russell’s logical proper names (see Section 1.2), which “refer to something without ascribing any properties to it” (302), than to Russell’s definite descriptions, which serve to express general propositions. Donnellan, in fact, goes as far as to say that “[m]any of the things said about proper names [in “the narrow logical sense”] by Russell can … be said about the referential use of definite descriptions without straining senses unduly” (282).

But what, if not the lexical material contained in it, makes it the case that a definite description in referential use refers to what it refers to? Unfortunately, Donnellan’s answer to this question is much less articulated than it should be. From some of his considerations, it seems that according to him referring is a function of *having in mind*. What having in mind amounts to, and how we get from having in mind to reference, however, is left in the dark. Perhaps, we may say that having in mind is a *cognitive relation*, which, in Donnellan’s account, plays the role that acquaintance played in Russell’s account of the reference of logical proper names. And perhaps, we may add that reference is a *historical relation*, because we can refer only to what has entered our mind (we refer *back* to it, so to speak). Nonetheless, it is important to note the difference between Donnellan’s views and Kripke’s picture of the reference of proper names. While in both cases reference is taken to be a historical relation, the history that Donnellan’s directs our attention to is the cognitive history of the speaker, and does not involve “other members of the language community”, to use Kaplan’s words. Because of this, Donnellan’s semantic views run the risk of being accused of subjectivism.[[21]](#footnote-21) This is probably one of the reasons which drove Kripke to react to them in the way we shall briefly examine in Section 3.

**3. One further issue: semantics versus pragmatics**

According to Kripke, “the distinction Donnellan brings out exists and is of fundamental importance” (Kripke 1977: 257): there are attributive uses and there are referential uses of definite descriptions. Indeed, the distinction may even be generalized: there are attributive uses and referential uses of proper names as well. But Donnellan is wrong in claiming that his considerations refute Russell’s theory. In fact, Donnellan’s distinction is not a *semantic* one. It is, rather, a *pragmatic* one, and as such is fully compatible with Russell’s account of the semantics of definite descriptions.[[22]](#footnote-22)

To show this, Kripke distinguishes, “following Grice” (Kripke 1977: 262), two different notions, which are those that give the title to his article: *semantic reference* and *speaker’s reference*. He illustrates them by means of an example involving proper names:

Two people see Smith in the distance and mistake him for Jones. They have a brief colloquy: “What is Jones doing?” “Raking the leaves”. “Jones”, in the common language of both, is a name of Jones; it *never* names Smith. Yet, in some sense, on this occasion, clearly both participants in the dialogue have referred to Smith, and the second participant has said something true about the man he referred to if and only if Smith was raking the leaves (whether or not Jones was) (263).

According to Kripke, in this example “Jones, the man named by the name, is the semantic referent”, while “Smith is the speaker’s referent, the correct answer to the question, ‘To whom were you referring?’ ” (264). Of semantic reference, Kripke says only that “[if] a speaker has a designator in his idiolect, certain conventions of his idiolect (given various facts about the world) determine the referent in the idiolect” (263). In the case of proper names, we may simply assume that semantic reference is the historical relation we discussed in Section 1.5.[[23]](#footnote-23) On the contrary,

the speaker’s referent of a designator [is] that object which the speaker wishes to talk about, on a given occasion, and believes fulfills the conditions for being the semantic referent of the designator. He uses the designator with the intention of making an assertion about the object in question (which may not really be the semantic referent, if the speaker’s belief that it fulfills the appropriate semantic conditions is in error). The speaker’s referent is the thing the speaker referred to by the designator, though it may not be the referent of the designator, in his idiolect (264).

Now, notice, first, that the notion of semantic reference can easily be extended to cover Russell’s definition of denotation, and, second, that the above characterization makes speaker’s reference somehow parasitic on semantic reference. Given all this, we can finally see how with the help of his two notions Kripke purports to account for Donnellan’s distinction in a way which is at least compatible with Russell’s semantic theory of descriptions:[[24]](#footnote-24)

In a given idiolect, the semantic referent of a designator (without indexicals) is given by a *general* intention of the speaker to refer to a certain object whenever the designator is used. The speaker’s referent is given by a *specific* intention, on a given occasion, to refer to a certain object. If the speaker believes that the object he wants to talk about, on a given occasion, fulfills the conditions for being the semantic referent, then he believes that there is no clash between his general intentions and his specific intentions. My hypothesis is that Donnellan’s referential-attributive distinction should be generalized in this light. For the speaker, on a given occasion, may believe that his specific intention coincides with his general intention for one of two reasons. In one case (the “simple” case), his specific intention is simply to refer to the semantic referent: that is, his specific intention *is* simply his general semantic intention. (For example, he uses “Jones” as a name of Jones—elaborate this according to your favorite theory of proper names—and, on this occasion, simply wishes to use “Jones” to refer to Jones.) Alternatively—the “complex” case—he has a specific intention, which is distinct from his general intention, but which he believes, as a matter of fact, to determine the same object as the one determined by his general intention. (For example, he wishes to refer to the man “over there” but believes that he *is* Jones.) In the “simple” case, the speaker’s referent is, *by definition*, the semantic referent. In the “complex” case, they may coincide, if the speaker’s belief is correct, but they need not. (The man “over there” may be Smith and not Jones.) (Kripke 1977: 264).

Given all this, Kripke’s hypothesis is “that Donnellan’s ‘attributive’ use is nothing but the ‘simple’ case, specialized to definite descriptions, and that the ‘referential’ use is, similarly, the ‘complex’ case” (264).

Kripke’s hypothesis is certainly intriguing, also because it promises to account for some important linguistic phenomena without making semantic reference a function of the speaker’s mind. However, it does not come without problems. One may be worried, for example, by its conspicuous appeal to intentions (general as well as specific). In any event, it is not within the scope of the present article to evaluate this. What is important to note here is rather that, first, thanks to Kripke, the notions of semantic reference and speaker’s reference, which were quite often confused in the literature about reference before his work, are now there to be further investigated; and, second, a claim about their relationship, which makes the latter parasitic on the former, has been advanced by him. This claim can be rephrased as a claim about the relationship between *semantics* and *pragmatics*, at least as far as the phenomenon of reference is concerned, and it certainly deserves to be discussed.[[25]](#footnote-25)

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1. In this article, I shall focus on singular definite descriptions and say nothing about plural definite descriptions (“the authors of the article you are reading”) and indefinite descriptions (“an Italian philosopher”). So, in what follows I shall often use “definite description” or even “description” as shorthand for “singular definite description” (as well as “name” for “proper name”). I shall use the verbs “describe” and “denote” accordingly, to deal with the relation that singular definite descriptions bear to their *denotatum*, without taking any stand on what other kinds of descriptions do. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The translation of the word “Bedeutung” as it occurs in Frege’s texts is a *vexata quaestio*. The most literal is certainly “meaning”. However, Frege explicitly takes some expressions without a *Bedeutung* (e.g., “Odysseus”) to be meaningful. For this and other reasons, many opt for “reference” instead. Unfortunately, while this would work in the case of *Eigennamen*, as we shall see in a moment, it sounds quite odd when sentences are at stake. So, I prefer to keep the German word in the text. For a more detailed discussion of these translation issues, see Beaney 1997a: 36-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As a matter of fact, this is not quite accurate, for two reasons. On the one hand, as already noted, according to Frege there are *Eigennamen* that do not have a *Bedeutung*. On the other, in his account sentences have definite objects as their *Bedeutung* (though very peculiar ones: the True and the False) but do not count as *Eigennamen*. Just for the record, I have modified all Michael Beaney’s translations so as to leave “*Eigenname*” untranslated (in this context, “proper name” is misleading, as we shall see in a moment). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Here, for example, is a passage where the notion of reference is explicitly connected with that of satisfaction of a condition: “An (individual) *description* is an expression of the form ‘(ι*x*)(..*x*..)’; it means ‘the one individual such that ..*x*..’. If there is one and only one individual such that ..*x*.., we say that the description satisfies the uniqueness condition. In this case the *descriptum*, i.e., the entity to which the description refers, is that one individual” (Carnap 1947: 32). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “The only kind of word that is theoretically capable of standing for a particular is a *proper name*, and the whole matter of proper names is rather curious” (Russell 1918-19: 200). Why the matter is curious, we shall see in a moment. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. As a matter of fact, in this form the argument is not valid, because, while it is true that to describe we need simple symbols, it is false that to do so we need proper names, i.e., simple symbols that refer to particulars. To make it valid, one can also, as I am inclined to do, call “reference” the relation that simple symbols bear to the universals they stand for. Alternatively, one can supplement the argument with another showing that no complete description of the world is possible that is purely general, i.e., that does not require the mention of any particular. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. By “proposition” Russell means here what may be expressed by sentences (Frege’s *Gedanken*). Just for the record, the Principle of Acquaintance was already formulated in ‘On denoting’: “in every proposition that we can apprehend (*i.e.* not only in those whose truth or falsity we can judge of, but in all that we can think about), all the constituents are really entities with which we have immediate acquaintance” (Russell 1905: 492). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Kaplan 2005: 973-1000 for a careful discussion of the entanglement of semantic and epistemological issues in Russell’s philosophy, and of his “allowing the demands of his epistemology to override his semantic convictions” (989). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Note that this has as a consequence something that makes Searle’s position vulnerable to at least some of the criticisms to description theories of proper names that we shall examine in Section 1.5: “it is a necessary fact that Aristotle has the logical sum, inclusive disjunction, of properties commonly attributed to him: any individual not having at least some of these properties could not be Aristotle” (172). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kripke also claims that they all maintained that proper names have their reference fixed by a definite description (where this means that the object referred to is the one that uniquely satisfies the condition individuated by the predicate occurring in the description), or by a cluster of definite descriptions. Strictly speaking, this is not true of Russell, since according to Russell actual proper names do not refer, while proper names in the strict logical sense do not refer by describing. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. There are some complications here that I shall ignore. Moreover, in the case of Searle one should talk of a cluster of descriptions rather than of a single description. For reasons of space, I shall present Kripke’s arguments in the simplest form. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Moreover, even leaving aside the details, there are some specific semantic problems that need to be addressed. If proper names do not have a descriptive meaning, it is quite natural to think that their semantic contribution is exhausted by the objects they refer to. This, however, is troubling both because of *empty names* and of the apparent *non substitutability of co-referential proper names in propositional attitude contexts*. For two different attempts to solve the first problem, see Donnellan 1974 and Braun 1993. Kripke (1979) somehow deflates the second problem. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The picture has been variously named in the subsequent literature. Donnellan (1974) advocates a version of it that he calls “the historical explanation view”. It is more common, though perhaps misleading, to refer to it as “the causal theory of (proper) names”, as in Evans 1973 (where an attempt is made to articulate a view coupling some aspects of it with some aspects of the description theory of names) and Devitt 1974 (where it is developed to a certain extent). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Russell’s article begins with the following list: “By a ‘denoting phrase’ I mean a phrase such as any one of the following: a man, some man, any man, every man, all men, the present King of England, the present King of France, the centre of mass of the Solar System at the first instant of the twentieth century, the revolution of the earth round the sun, the revolution of the sun round the earth” (479). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. “ ‘C (some men)’ will mean the same as ‘C (a man)’, and ‘C (a man)’ means ‘It is false that ‘C (*x*) and *x* is human’ is always false’ ” (481). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. As a matter of fact, if “Andrea” is an abbreviation of a definite description, as Russell began to believe soon after writing ‘On denoting’ (see Section 1.2), even (7) is existential in form and “involves uniqueness”. However, if the position of grammatical subject were occupied by a logical proper name, the resulting sentence would express a *singular* rather than a general proposition. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Russell focused on propositional attitude contexts (“George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*”), but his considerations are relevant for modal contexts as well (“It is not necessary that Scott was the author of *Waverley*”), as was shown by Arthur Smullyan (1948) to rebut some arguments by Willard Van Orman Quine against modal talk. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It is also worth noting that if proper names were definite descriptions in disguise, Russell’s solutions might be extended to the problems of true negative existential sentences containing them (e.g., “Pegasus does not exist”), and of the apparent violation of Leibniz’s law because of the non substitutability *salva veritate* of co-denoting names in certain linguistic contexts (e.g., “Babylonians believed that Hesperus was not Phosphorous”). Unfortunately, as Kripke has shown (see section 1.5), proper names *are not* definite descriptions in disguise. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Just for the record, Russell was not exactly impressed by Strawson’s criticisms. In a reply to Strawson’s article, he wrote: “I am totally unable to see any validity whatever in any of Mr. Strawson’s arguments” (Russell 1957: 385). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. At the end of his article, Kripke reiterates the point: “it seems to me to be likely that ‘indefinite’ definite descriptions such as ‘the table’ present difficulties for a Russellian analysis”; in fact, “[i]t is somewhat tempting to assimilate such descriptions to the corresponding demonstratives (for example, ‘that table’)” (271). Assimilation like this is urged in Wettstein 1981, where the phenomenon of indefinite definite descriptions and the difficulties it presents for Russell’s theory are discussed in more detail. See also Kaplan 1978, Devitt 1981 and 2004, and Wettstein 1983. Russell’s theory is defended against such criticisms in Bach 1981: 237-40 and 2004: 220-3, Neale 1990: sec. 3.7, and Soames 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Donnellan (1968) tries to defend himself from the accusation, which was actually brought against him by Alfred MacKay (1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For a defense of the idea that the distinction is semantically significant, see Donnellan 1978, Wettstein 1981 and 1983, Devitt 1981 and 2004, and Amaral 2008. Note, however, that Wettstein’s and Devitt’s accounts are different from Donnellan’s, in that they do not allow a definite description in referential use to refer to something which does not fit it. Indeed, they tend to assimilate definite descriptions in referential uses to demonstrative descriptions (see note 20). So, their accounts appear to be Strawsonian more than Donnellanian. On the contrary, Bach 1981 and 2004, Salmon 1982, 1991 and 2005, Neale 1990: chap. 3, and Soames 1994 and 2005: 388-94 side with Kripke and argue that the distinction is to be accounted in pragmatic terms. Kripke’s approach to Donnellan’s distinction is somehow anticipated, in passing, by Paul Grice (1969: 141-4). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Indeed, Kripke writes: “If the views about proper names I have advocated in ‘Naming and Necessity’ are correct …, the conventions regarding names in an idiolect usually involve the fact that the idiolect is no mere idiolect, but part of a common language, in which reference may be passed from link to link” (273 n. 20). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Kripke substantiates the last point by considering some hypothetical languages which are as similar as possible to English except that Russell’s theory is stipulated to be correct for them: “[s]ince the phenomenon Donnellan cites *would* arise in all the Russell languages, if they *were* spoken, the fact they *do* arise in English, as *actually* spoken, can be no argument that English is not a Russell language” (Kripke 1977: 266). Unfortunately, I cannot go into the details here. The argument, however, is challenged in Devitt 2004: 287-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. I would like to thank Antonio Capuano, Andrea Marino, and especially Paolo Leonardi, Ernesto Napoli, and Marco Santambrogio for their comments on previous versions of this work. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)