

Pragmatic ambiguity and Kripke's dialogue against Donnellan

Ambiguidade Pragmática e o diálogo de Kripke contra Donnellan

Carlo Penco

(Universidade de Genova, Itália)

Abstract

In this paper I discuss Donnellan's claim of the pragmatic ambiguity of the distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions. The literature on the topic is huge and full of alternative analysis. I will restrict myself to a very classical *topos*: the challenge posed by Kripke to Donnellan's distinction with the case of a dialogue on an attempt to update a misdescription. I claim that to treat the problem of the referential use of definite descriptions we need not only to take into account the context of utterance, but also the cognitive context with its epistemic restrictions and the possible different contexts of reception of the same utterance. I try to show different aspects of what can be called "pragmatic ambiguity", which seem not correctly considered by Kripke, and connect them to the basic tenets of Grice Cooperative principle.

Keywords: Assertion. Charity Principle. Definite Descriptions. Reference. Speech Acts.

Resumo

Neste artigo, discutimos a alegação de Donnellan da ambiguidade pragmática da distinção entre usos referenciais e atributivos de descrições definidas. A literatura sobre o tema é enorme e cheia de análises alternativas. Restringir-nos-emos a um *topos* muito clássico: o desafio proposto por Kripke à distinção de Donnellan com o caso de um diálogo sobre uma tentativa de atualizar uma descrição errada. Afirmamos que, para tratar o problema do uso referencial das descrições definidas, precisamos não apenas levar em conta o contexto do enunciado, mas também o contexto cognitivo com suas restrições epistêmicas e os possíveis diferentes contextos de recepção do mesmo enunciado. Tentaremos mostrar diferentes aspectos do que pode ser chamado de "ambiguidade pragmática", que parecem não ser corretamente considerados por Kripke, e conectá-los aos princípios básicos do princípio Cooperativo de Grice.

Palavras-chave: Asserção. Princípio da Caridade. Descrições Definidas. Referência. Atos de Fala.

1 Pragmatic ambiguity

We often find in pragmatics many tools and topics used in the field of rhetorics in new way. Ambiguity is a typical case. In this paper I will refer to a problem deeply entrenched in the debate on pragmatics: the idea of *pragmatic ambiguity*. On this idea there is a sharp contrast between different trends of thought. Donnellan (1968) wrote about a pragmatic ambiguity between the attributive and referential uses of descriptions, and Stalnaker (1970), commenting on Donnellan's paper, explains what it means "pragmatic ambiguity". The case proposed by Donnellan concerns two possible uses of a sentence with a definite description like:

(1) Smith's murderer was insane.

Depending on the situation I may use the description "Smith's murderer" in two radically different ways:

(2) Smith's murderer [whoever he is] is insane

The sentence (1) may mean (2) if uttered in a scene presenting a vision of the brutal manner in which Smith, a very kind person, was killed. In another situation, looking at the person charged with Smith's murder and behaving very strangely at the trial sentence (1) may mean

(3) Smith's murderer [that person in front of us] is insane.

The attributive use would be exemplified by (2), typically treated à la Russell (there is a unique x who is a

Smith's murder and he is insane), while the referential use would be exemplified by (3), where there is no Russellian analysis, but some kind of direct reference to the intended individual. The two intended interpretations are not explicit in the utterance, and Donnellan claims that there is some kind of ambiguity that is neither syntactic nor semantic, but pragmatic. Stalnaker agrees and poses a further possibility about the idea of pragmatic ambiguity, concerning the problems posed by presuppositions (a typical case discussed in pragmatic analysis). The failure of the presupposition of existence creates problems for (2), but not for (3): if there is no murder, but Smith committed suicide or was killed by more than one person, then there is no unique individual that murdered Smith and therefore, with (2), we fail to refer; instead, with (3), we refer to the person accused of murder even if he is innocent, and even if Smith committed suicide, because we intend to refer to *him*, to that person in front of us. Therefore, Stalnaker (1970) concludes (with another example) that, given that the same sentence may have different truth values depending of a missing presupposition, this seems to be a case of pragmatic ambiguity. From the example it follows that a pragmatic ambiguity may have semantic consequences.

Contra Donnellan's analysis, Kripke (1975) claims that pragmatic ambiguity does not exist unless inside Speech Act theory, and the phenomenon of ambiguity is either syntactic or semantics. Furthermore, Kripke claims also that there is no syntactic or semantic ambiguity of the article "the", and a distinction between speaker's reference and semantic reference would give a better account to the problems posed by Donnellan's distinction. The debate on the contrast between Donnellan and Kripke went on for a

while, until a new wave of interest in definite descriptions was prompted by the hundredth anniversary of Russell's "On Denoting" (e.g. Bezuidenhout and Reimer (2004), Neale (2005), Liston (2007)). From then onwards, the discussion has produced many deep analysis, and it is almost impossible to take care of all different interpretations. I will therefore keep the scope of my paper on the topic of Kripke's challenge and on his example of two dialogues one of which he claims Donnellan's distinction cannot explain.

Before discussing Kripke's claims, a warning about an ambiguity in the debate itself may be useful. We have basically two kinds of interpretation of the phenomenon, a pragmatic and a semantic one¹. The so-called Kripke's "pragmatic solution" to the problems posed by Donnellan does not mean accepting the idea that Donnellan's distinction is a pragmatic, on the contrary. Speaking of "pragmatic solution" we normally refer to the idea that denies any ambiguity (either pragmatic or semantic) to

¹ Presenting the two kinds of solutions, Neale (2004) remarks that on one side, the "unificationist" Russellian analysis is supported, in different ways, by Simon Blackburn, William Blackburn, Hector-Neri Castañeda, Donald Davidson, Martin Davies, Gareth Evans, Peter Geach, Paul Grice, Stuart Hampshire, Saul Kripke, Stephen Neale, Mark Sainsbury, Nathan Salmon, John Searle, Scott Soames, David Wiggins, while other scholars opt for a semantically distinct referential reading (Joseph Almog, Jon Barwise, Anne Bezuidenhout, Robyn Carston, Michael Devitt, Keith Donnellan, Jennifer Hornsby, David Kaplan, David Lewis, Chris Peacocke, John Perry, François Récanati, Marga Reimer, Bede Rundle, Stephen Schiffer, Robert Stalnaker, Howard Wettstein). I follow a unificationist view, but moderated by the claim that we can render Donnellan's idea of pragmatic ambiguity inside this view. From the above list there is a name missing: Kent Bach (2007) claims that there are other pragmatic inferences beyond Gricean implicature and the referential/attributive distinction might avoid to be treated neither as a semantic ambiguity nor as syntactic ambiguity, but expressing a new kind of pragmatic phenomenon.

uses of definite article. A pragmatic solution typically accepts a Russellian analysis for all the cases presented by Donnellan: a speaker may even use a false definite description, interpreted in the standard Russellian way, and by some kind of Gricean implicature, the hearer gets the right content, maybe just realizing that the description is false. The alternative “semantic solution” (e.g. Devitt, 2004) claims, against Kripke, that there is a semantic ambiguity, contra what Donnellan’s claims about his distinction as representing not a semantic, but a pragmatic ambiguity. Therefore neither the first nor the second interpretation seem interested to Donnellan’s idea of pragmatic ambiguity. The topic of pragmatic ambiguity of Donnellan’s distinction instead is the topic of the present paper.

2 Belief Reports: Making viewpoints explicit

In a final remark of his (1979) paper, “A puzzle about belief”, Saul Kripke says that, when considering situations which lead to contradictory reports of belief, “we enter into an area where our normal practices of interpretation and attribution of belief are subjected to the greatest possible strain, perhaps to the point of breakdown. So is the notion of the content of someone’s assertion, the proposition it expresses.” (p. 423) The present paper is intended to be a contribution to the concept of “content of an assertion”, but also to the problem of understanding, following Kaplan (2005), who claims that to properly treat the problem of definite descriptions we need to distinguish carefully the semantic aspect and the epistemic aspect, the first concerning truth conditions of sentences containing definite descriptions, the second

concerning our capacity to understand definite descriptions, even without cognitive access to what is the described object. Following the ideas of Donnellan, Kaplan (2012) seems more disposed to let cognitive aspects enter semantics as “ways of having in mind”. In both cases the topic of understanding becomes a relevant topic that touches upon the intentions behind the uses of definite descriptions.

In the present paper I will use different versions of the classical example proposed by Leonard Linsky (1963): looking at a man who treats kindly a nearby woman, Jones sincerely asserts:

(4) “Her husband is kind to her” (short for “The husband of the lady is kind to her”)²

Assuming, as Linsky does, that the lady has no husband, and the man was the lover of the woman, what should we say of the assertion itself?

We may assume that the speaker is sincere, and the assertion is *not an abuse*; we may further assume that the speaker has at least some justification for his belief in asserting (4), for instance the confidence with which the man treated the woman might have been an evidence that he might have been her husband. Although it is not a conclusive justification, we might think that the convention behind the act of asserting are realized and we may claim

² For the sake of simplicity I will not consider the further difficulties of the use of pronouns, that – for the present discussion – would be assimilated to a standard definite description as the (syntactically incorrect) “*the* husband of her”, or, as Kripke sometimes uses “the man who married her”. (We might use other classical examples, but I prefer to keep the specific example discussed by Kripke, 1977).

that the assertion is *not a misfire*³. Now, there remains a last question: What is the content of the assertion? And Is it true or false?

Linsky claims that the assertion should be neither true nor false, following a Frege-Strawson attitude. Keith Donnellan claims that Linsky's answer may work for the attributive use of the definite description, when the description is applied to whoever fits the description. However, if the expression "her husband" has a referential use, we cannot simply say that the assertion is false. Actually Donnellan (1966, p. 26) claims:

(5) "when a speaker uses a definite description referentially he may have stated something true".

Assuming that the lady is a spinster, this claim sounds strange and in need of a justification. But the main aspect that makes us uneasy to say that Jones said something true is that *we* would not and could not report

³ We may assume that an assertion, to be a "well formed" speech act, needs to be true, justified and sincere; we need all these three conditions to be fulfilled; if some of them is missing, we have three different kinds of failures:

(i) *abuse*: to assert something believing it to be false is an abuse of the convention of asserting or, as Austin would say, an abuse of the presupposition of what is an assertion (that's the classical point of denying the possibility to say "*p* and I don't believe that *p*")

(ii) *misfire*: to assert something without *any* ground is more than a simple abuse of the act of asserting; to assert something you need to be in a position to do that. For Brandom (1994) you need to be "entitled" and have the capacity to answer "why did you said that?" Shortly: we assert only what we can justify, if not we do not have the right to make a proper assertion.

(iii) *falsity*: assertion is intended to say something true. However sincerely saying something false, with some non-conclusive evidence, is not a standard case of "misfire". We reject the content because false, but we accept that the speaker has uttered a false assertion, or – more modestly – an assertion we judge false.

his assertion with his words, if we knew that the lover was not the husband. Assuming the information that the lady is a spinster, we should not report Jones' belief as

(6) "Jones believes that her husband is kind to her"

Belief reports should make it explicit the interplay of the points of view of speaker and reporter. Perry (2013) has given an excellent rendering of this problem in his taking of Kripke's puzzle about belief. I will use some simplifications here, in order to give the most basic alternative way of giving a report of (4). We may use a de re report of the following kind:

(7) "of the person he though was her husband, Jones said he was kind to her".⁴

In saying (7) we make explicit that: (i) even if the intention of the speaker was to tell the truth, we explicitly refuse to endorse his description (ii) Jones said of the person he is referring to, that he is kind. Therefore, our report is both on John's point of view and on our own⁵.

⁴ Actually we do not necessarily need to use a de re rendering as: "John says of the person he believes to be her husband, that he is kind to her" but also: "John says that the person, he believes to be her husband, is kind to her". The fact that we may use both de re and de dicto rendering of the report is coherent with Donnellan's claim that that attributive/referential use has nothing to do with de dicto/de re distinctions, which is recognized by Kripke (1997 and 2005), who shows the importance of scope in treating different aspects of the interplay of definite descriptions and modalities.

⁵ The wording we use in reports (both de dicto and de re) seems to have an intuitive impact on different degrees of commitments, as Brandom 1994 would say. Here I suggest to distinguish (i) *committed-report*: "John says that her husband is kind to her"; (ii) *uncommitted-report*: "John says that the person he believes to be her husband is kind to her" (iii) *anti-committed*

However, we have not yet a clear idea of which is the *content of Jones' assertion*, or the reason for which Donnellan claims (5).

Given the scene setting, the normal assessment of Jones' assertion is that Jones says at the same time something true (that person is kind) and something false (that person is a husband). This is one of the most widespread solutions of Donnellan's puzzle (Neale (2004), Devitt (2004), Soames (2005)). But Donnellan claims, with (5), that in a referential use a speaker may say something true, notwithstanding the attributive use would define the sentence as false. Does the idea of pragmatic ambiguity have some interesting theoretical consequences on the definition of the content of an assertion? I will offer different arguments whose main point will be the defence of the idea that an assertion may have at the same time different contents depending on different uses, presuppositions and cognitive contexts.

3 Belief update: a test for semantic or pragmatic interpretations

The ambiguity of referential/attributive uses hints at two possible intentions of the speaker, without any previous assumption on the actual marital status of the lady. As Donnellan (1966, p. 20): "In general, whether or not a definite description is used referentially or attributively is a function of the speaker's intentions in a particular case." In the particular case in which the speaker is influenced by the evidence of some intimacy

report: "John says that the person he erroneously believes to be her husband is kind to her". In (i) I don't take distance from John's belief, while in (ii) I don't reject it, but I don't undertake it either; I reject it explicitly only in (iii).

between the two, he may be brought to intend “her husband” referentially; if the speaker is just remarking the general happiness of the lady, he may easily intend the same expression attributively because the evidence points to a possible husband, whoever he is, which is so kind to let the woman happy. Is this a real pragmatic ambiguity?

Kripke challenges Donnellan’s distinction, to be contrasted with his solution of the difference between speaker’s reference and semantic reference. Kripke (1977, p. 256) changes the stage setting as follows: the lady has a husband who is in general *not* kind to her (with the supposition that the man in the scene is the lover “to whom she has been driven by her husband cruelty”). Kripke then proposes two possible dialogues in which an interlocutor B tries to make the speaker aware of his mistake. In this example we have a shift from belief reports to belief update: how can we make a speaker change his mind in front of new information?

In what follows “A” stands for “Jones” and “B” stands for an interlocutor, who, by assumption, knows the actual marital status of the lady:

Dialogue (I)

A: “Her husband is kind to her”

B: “No, he isn’t. The man you’re referring isn’t her husband”.

Dialogue (II)

A: “Her husband is kind to her”

B: “He is kind to her, but he isn't her husband”

Kripke presents at least four different claims against Donnellan. I will check each of those claims and try to hint

at some possible alternatives.

3.1 Donnellan claims that his distinction is neither syntactic nor semantic, but it is a pragmatic ambiguity. Kripke (1977, p. 262) claims that “if the sentence is not (syntactically or) semantically ambiguous, it has only one analysis; to say that it has two distinct analyses is to attribute a syntactic or semantic ambiguity to it.” Besides, although Donnellan claims that his distinction implies a pragmatic ambiguity, his paper seems to be compatible with a semantic ambiguity. But his distinction – Kripke argues – does not amount to a semantic ambiguity that falsifies Russell’s analysis.

The claim that there is no pragmatic ambiguity seems an exaggeration. We can speak of pragmatic ambiguity: why not? It does not only concern speech acts (but on this see section 4.1 later), and it may concern misunderstanding intentions in context and or having different presuppositions. As we have seen, with Stalnaker, a difference in presuppositions may be considered a pragmatic ambiguity and may have a semantic import, bringing about the possibility of a sentence having different truth conditions depending on different intentions held by the speaker and depending on the context of utterance. I will claim that a speaker may also have two different intentions at the same time, depending on different targets of his utterance (see 4.1).

A first step for clarifying the matter may be a “translation” of the two interpretations with an explicit rendering of the different intentions of the speaker:

(8) “the person A has in mind is kind to her”

(9) “the person that has the property of being her husband, whoever he is, is kind”

It is apparent that (8) and (9) may have different truth conditions. We might also say that the first sentence concerns reference and the second denotation (e.g. Capuano, 2016), and this solution seems a variant of the solution grounded on the difference between speaker’s reference and semantic (denotational) reference. The point however is that the ambiguity of (4) does not concern lexicon nor the syntactic structure, but the intention of the speaker. If we accept Kripke’s point that there is no semantic ambiguity in the meaning of “the”, the idea that there is a pragmatic ambiguity, depending on the context and the intention of the speaker, it is still available. The fact that the analysis of this particular example may be treated also with the support of the distinction between speaker’s reference and semantic reference does not exclude per se Donnellan’s solution, which purports to make the assertion of (4) a true statement and not a false statement triggering an implicature by its falsity. Contra Kripke’s pragmatic solution, we may notice that, according to Grice, an implicature is connected to the speaker’s intention that a hearer understands the falsity of what is said and derives by this recognition the implicated content. However, this does not seem the point of Jones’ utterance, that seems to be produced according to a sincere belief that the man in the scene is the husband, and therefore his intention is to make this person recognised as such. As Donnellan (1966, p. 14) claims, “There is a presumption that a person who uses a definite description referentially believes that what he wishes to

refer to fits the description.” Therefore there is no implicature in the Gricean sense from the point of view of the speaker. Also for this reason, some authors like Ludlow and Neale (2007) claim that the pragmatic solution à la Kripke gives “an ex post facto justification” and does not provide an explanation of how or why a hearer infers what the speaker intends to communicate.

3.2 The best treatment of the phenomenon of definite descriptions is the unificationist view, that is the treatment of all cases under some kind of Russellian formulation and Donnellan’s referential uses are not “inexplicable” on Russell’s theory (Kripke, 1977, p. 257).

Accepting the idea that we have a pragmatic ambiguity seems to have as consequence that the two interpretations (8) and (9) have different logical forms: the referential reading would give a singular proposition or an ordered pair with the individual in the scene and the property of being kind, while the attributive reading would have the standard quantificational Russellian form. The referential use would be similar to the use of a proper name, which directly refers to an individual. Contra this possibility, Kripke’s answer is that both readings have the form “ $\psi(\iota x \phi(x))$ ” or “the $x Fx) Gx$ ”⁶. Therefore “her husband” means something like

(10) “the unique person that has the property of being her husband”

⁶ We might also see in Russell some second thoughts about reconsidering something like a presuppositional analysis (as Frege had already suggested). On this see Kaplan (2005).

What Donnellan tries to explain with the “referential use” amounts to the speaker’s reference, that is the is just “the object to which the speaker wishes to refer, and which he believes fulfills the Russellian conditions for being the semantic referent.” (Kripke, 1977, p. 266). Given that the lover is not the husband, Kripke’s pragmatic solution of a conversational implicature seemed the simplest solution: realising the falsity of the description, we understand the speaker’s reference by implicature.

But we have other possibilities to keep a quantificational reading and yet keeping a difference between referential and attributive uses. Neale (2004), Soames (2005) and Ludlow-Neale (2007) propose for the referential uses a formula like

(11) “[The $x Fx$] & $x = that$ ”

We would have two different quantificational readings, one for the attributive and one for the referential use. However, this solution has two disadvantages. On the one hand it would make the two interpretations relying on different hidden syntactic differences, imposing a syntactic ambiguity that would require a deep revision of our syntax. On the other hand it runs the risk to become an example of the semantic ambiguity proposed by Devitt 2004 as an alternative to Kripke’s view. In fact, Devitt (2007, p. 28-31) claims that the solution given in (11) is only pseudo-Russellian. The insertion of a demonstrative like “that” makes the quantified formula almost useless and the descriptive component semantically inert, making the definite description analogous to a complex demonstrative.

Are there alternatives? My suggestion is to insert in

the quantificational form a function of the speaker's intention, that would be activated in context and would become idle when not activated. The basic structure of a definite description would give priority to referential uses, as giving a restriction on the general form "the $x Fx$ " as

(12) "The unique $x Fx$ the speaker has in mind"

What the speaker has in mind may depend, at first choice, on the particular (wide) context of utterance, or the situation in which the sentence is uttered. This solution might be presented as a unitary account which would work both for referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions:

(13) "The $x \Delta Fx$ "

First of all, this would vindicate Donnellan's claim (5) according to which the content of the assertion with a misdescription may be true. Certainly, "her husband is kind" is literally wrong if the man is not her husband. It might be a "reference fixing description". But what are reference fixing descriptions, given that they fix the reference even if they are wrong? On what ground can we use a reference fixing description in this case?

Usually most of our definite descriptions, in everyday conversation, have two main features: (i) they start from the context of utterance (ii) they use an approximate description. This has a consequence also in the possibility of understanding a description: in front of a definite description, the first step of the hearer is to check the possible individual, which is present in the scene and appears to fit the description. "What the speaker has in

mind” therefore means: “what appears to have the property given by the descriptive content used by the speaker”. If nothing is found in the scene to which we can apply the description, then we skip to the attributive use. This means that the speaker has in mind whoever fits the description, even if not present in the scene. Therefore the logical structure of a referential description is the same at the syntactic level to the one of an attributive use of a description; the availability of an individual (apparently) fitting the predicate in the context disambiguates the utterance of a definite description, making it a case of referential use.

Referential uses of definite descriptions are probably the first way children learn to use definite descriptions. If there is an x in the context that has the property F or for which there is some evidence in the context that has the property F , then we have a referential description. If there is nobody in the context at least slightly fit for the description, we shift to the attributive use. This is an empirical hypothesis of the evolution of language understanding in children, but it may also be considered a theoretical possibility to think the use of definite description depending on the context of utterance and the intention of the speaker.

In our proposal, Δ may be considered a function of the speaker’s default justificatory attitude, or contextual evidence. What we say is said with the assumption that we are not perfect knowers: a definite description has the aim to pick an individual, not to give the most perfect scientific definition of an individual. Approximate, vague, even mistaken definitions are the most standard uses of definite descriptions (for a variety see Korta Perry, 2011, chapter 8). Our habit to use loose talk would give “her

husband” a reading that, following (12), would be something like

(14) “What the speaker is justified by momentary evidence to be her husband”

If this proposal can be conceived as a way to keep the Russellian quantificational structure then this proposal is in agreement with Kripke’s idea that Donnellan’s distinction does not undermine a Russellian analysis. However it requires a deep change in the view held by Russell, inserting an epistemological aspect in semantics (a justified “way of having in mind”).

3.3 the distinction between speaker’s reference and semantic reference, in analogy with the Gricean distinction between speaker’s meaning and semantic meaning, (Kripke, 1977, p. 262-264) is a better solution to the problems posed by Donnellan than the distinction between referential and attributive uses.

According to Kripke (1977, p. 270), on the ground that “pronominalization can pick up *either* a previous semantic reference or a previous speaker’s reference”, we may say that (see p. 112)

in dialogue (I) B uses “he” to refer to the semantic referent of “her husband”,

in dialogue (II) B uses “he” to refer to the speaker’s referent.

In respect of (II) also Donnellan may easily explain the dialogue. While B uses speaker’s reference (from

Kripke's perspective) he may also makes a referential use of the description, that co-refer with the use made by A (from Donnellan's perspective). However, Kripke argues that the first dialogue would be impossible to explain with the conceptual tools given by Donnellan.

In the first dialogue, saying "he isn't" ("he is not kind") B simply refers to the semantic referent of "her husband" while Donnellan's distinction would permit B's assertion only in the case B misunderstood the speaker's use of "her husband" as attributive; but, at the same time, it is clear that B has understood to whom A was referring. This difficulty to explain the first dialogue with Donnellan's distinction is considered by Kripke as evidence against the idea that we have a semantic distinction between referential and attributive uses.

However, also Kripke's solution is not so clear: in dialogue (I) it is apparent that A refers to the lover and not to the husband, and yet B uses "he" as semantic reference and not as speaker's referent. Although the basic idea is that pronominalization can refer to a previous semantic reference, the question is where the previous semantic reference comes from. Where does the semantic reference come from? From the information given by God to B? From the assumption on the theoretician's assumption? Why couldn't Donnellan make a similar move? B might use attributively "he" in answering, although acknowledging that A used "he" referentially. Just like the "he" of semantic reference does not corefer with the "her husband" of the speaker, in the same way the attributive use of "he" does not corefer with the "referential use" of A. In this case the speaker proposes *ex abrupto* to change the game and use the description attributively. Using "he" attributively, B *rejects* the use

done by A, just like using “he” as semantic reference *rejects* the speaker’s reference proposed by A.

Besides, if we used a quantificational reading with the insertion of a function connected with speaker’s viewpoint, we might explain the dialogue as follows:

(15) A: the $x \Delta_A$ Husband x is kind to her

B: the $x \Delta_B$ Husband x is not kind to her.

The $x \Delta_A$ Husband $x \neq$ the $x \Delta_B$ Husband x

In prose A means: “the person I am justified to believe is her husband is kind to her”; while B means: “the person I am justified to believe is her husband is not kind to her. What I believe to be her husband is different by what you believe to be her husband”. Making the different presuppositions explicit permits the dialogue to be performed with better capacity of persuasion and with the honest recognition that both speakers may be wrong (on this last point see the last section of the present paper).

3.4 On the two dialogues presented as test to check Donnellan’s intuition Kripke says that his tendency is “to think that both dialogues are proper” (Kripke, 1977, p. 270) that is they are acceptable dialogues that show two similar attempts to correct the mistake of the speaker, who erroneously believes that the man near the woman is her husband.

From the previous discussion, another point follows, concerning the dissimilarity between the two dialogues. Kripke himself seems uncertain whether both dialogues

are proper, but has the “tendency” to think so. From a pragmatic viewpoint they are not, granted that the question under discussion (QuD) is the kindness of the person in the scene. We are looking at a scene and we are giving our judgment on it. Dialogue (II) keeps the question under discussion, and proceeds, showing a mistake in the definition. In Dialogue (I) B abandons the question under discussion and changes topic, missing the point of A’s assertion, which concerns the present scene and not the marital status. A seems not interest at all of the marital status of the lady, but only of the kind attitude of the man towards the woman. In dialogue (I) B changes the QuD and put as the main problem the marital status of the lady. This is unfair to a normal conversation: the main core of Grice Cooperative principle is to make your contribution following “the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange”. Therefore, from the viepoint of conversation, Dialogue (II) is more correct that dialogue (I), contra the claim that “both dialogs are proper” (Kripke, 1977, p. 270).

In a setting where the question under discussion were the marital status (for instance in a trial for divorce), then the attention would shift from the topic of kindness to the topic of “who is the husband”. But, given the premises of the dialogue, this is not the main interest of the speaker.

My conclusion is that the two dialogues are not on the same level and dialogue (I) is not proper from a pragmatic viewpoint, given that it violates the Cooperation principle, abruptly changing the direction of the talk exchange. It is not only a question of fairness or politeness, but a question of understandability of the conversation. This problem is related more to a theory of dialogue and communication than to semantics. And we

end these remarks on the consequences of the pragmatic ambiguity of Donnellan's distinction in understanding communication strategies

4 Communication strategies: shifting contexts and uncertain reasoning

Descriptions (even "wrong" descriptions) do not come alone; they come with implicit justifications. Therefore, assertions can be interpreted according to their possible and most plausible justifications. This is linked to a justification requirement for any assertion: we may always ask which justification can be given for an assertion. In the case discussed here it is easy to understand Jones – unless he had been intentionally said a falsity – as a speaker who justifies his belief with a default rule of the kind: "if x is a man and he is openly intimate with a woman, then typically x is her husband". It is reasonable to think that most of our thoughts have some default built in, which makes us think in an approximate and quick way (see Bach (1985), but also Benzi-Penco (2018)). We may use this default rule for referring to an individual, while keeping into account the information we have at hand. This connection between the content of an assertion and the information we have gives rise to two problems. What happens when the speaker has a lot of information on the different participants to the conversation and their beliefs or assumptions? Which role has our limited capacity of information, an aspect we give for granted in everyday conversation? The last two sections try to answer these two points.

4.1 *Shifting contexts of reception*

The role of the awareness of the speaker about the beliefs of the audience is often passed by very quickly, or just given as a restriction on which kinds of lexical tools the speaker can reasonably use to be understood. Speakers do not speak in the void, but always in a context of utterance that normally coincide with the context of reception (or the context of production is often the same of the context of audition). Sometimes the “context of reception” can be different from the context of utterance, for instance with a message left somewhere for people to read or hear later (Predelli). However, we may use the idea of context of reception to define different sets of hearer in the same conversation. In fact, participants to a conversation often have different assumptions and presuppositions. It is one of the typical communicative capacities of politicians to use a sentence, and, at the same time, mean different contents for different people. Not only politicians, but also normal speakers may develop the ability of saying different things, expressing different propositions, with one utterance. If a speaker is aware of the different assumptions of different hearers he may utter a sentence with different intended interpretations, related to the different presuppositions and assumptions of the hearers.

Let us go back to the situation in which the lady has a husband who is not kind and Jones says “Her husband is kind to her”. What does Jones mean if he is aware of different presuppositions of different groups of hearers? Let us assume that Jones comes to know that the lady has a terrible cruel husband, but he also knows that (i) most people in the audience have no idea of that (ii) few people

know that the lady is married and (iii) a restricted group of people know that the real husband is cruel and therefore unkind. We have here a case where the same sentence may express different contents, different propositions, depending on the beliefs entertained by the audience and their accessibility to right information. We have here a new case of “pragmatic ambiguity”: the same utterance can be interpreted as different speech acts, with different propositional contents. These different speech acts and different contents depend on the intention of the speaker to address different hearers at the same time, acknowledging that the utterance would be interpreted in different ways by different hearers, with their different presuppositions. As Neale (2004, p. 77) says, “What A meant by uttering X on a particular occasion is determined by, and only by, certain very specific interpreter-directed intentions A had in uttering X.” In our case the speaker may have different specific interpreter-directed intentions given that the awareness of different kinds of presuppositions or assumptions the speaker knows the hearers (or interpreters) have. In the three cases given above, with the utterance of “her husband is kind to her”, Jones will contemporarily express, besides a possible attributive use, three different speech acts:

- (i) An assertion with a referential description saying something true of the intended referent, as understood by most people within the audience. In fact this sentence may be the best way to convey the right information to hearers, ignorant of the marital status of the lady, that the relevant man in the scene is actually kind to her.

(ii) An assertion with the intention to refer to the real husband (and this is a referential use *in absentia*), with the awareness of saying something that triggers a problematic interpretation for the hearers who know that the lady is married and may wonder why Jones is saying that in that context.

(iii) An assertion with the intention to refer to the real husband (as above), meaning – for the few that know that the real husband is really unkind – something that would implicate, from the apparent falsity, a form of irony of mockery (e.g. that the husband is so kind to let her staying with a lover, or what you like).

Here the contents of the assertion express different truth conditions because they pick different individuals, and at the same time express different speech acts not only with different locutionally meaning, but also perlocutionally meaning (if you give me the availability of this possible interpretation of perlocutionally meaning, but we may use the idea of implicature instead). This is a very apparent case of ambiguity in conversation depending on the complex intentions of the speaker, a topic for every theory of communication. This possibility would vindicate an aspect of what Kripke (1977, p. 271) claims: the problems raised by Donnellan would be well treated by a general theory of speech acts.

But there is a deeper problem dealing with referential and attributive uses of descriptions, which is brought to us by our condition of uncertainty given our limited means of obtaining information from the context.

4.2 Bounded rationality and default charity principle

The debate on Donnellan's example has always been made from the point of view of metaphysics, assuming some given state of affair (either there is no husband, or there is an husband who is kind or unkind to her and is not identical with the person in the scene).

A hearer ignorant of the facts can easily accept the assertion as something true of the person Jones is referring to. If other relevant information enter the common ground, for instance the hearer comes to know that the woman have an unkind husband who is not identical with the person referred to by Jones, the sentence can be interpreted as expressing a different content. But if we want to describe the working of our everyday conversations, we have to take care of limited information we are bound (just think of Herbert Saimon's bounded rationality), a condition that obliges us to always reason under some form of uncertainty. In this perspective our rendering of dialogue (I) in (15) seems the best way to treat limited information. If we don't use a hypothetical metaphysical viewpoint (what is the truth of the matter), we are left with different justifications. Maybe speaker B *believes* that the lady has an husband, but he may not know that they divorced recently, and what he think is a lover is just the new husband. Therefore B is wrong in criticising A, who speaks correctly. But, who knows? Maybe the new husband just divorced and he is kind because they both agree about their separation and she is happy of the money coming from the divorce. And so on. Every dialogue in normal conversation is full of possible new information challenging the assumptions given for granted. While conversating we are not obliged

to check what we are saying as in a courtroom. Therefore definite descriptions can *always* be considered as provisional determinations that can be used for referring, with the clause that we may always change our mind, if necessary.

We may conceive every assertion as linked to different “reasonable” assumptions of the participants in a dialogue. This default version of Quine’s charity principle would help us to make speakers more rational than they appear when they are interpreted with too stubborn logical rules. Default assumptions are something we use for the sake of simplicity with the idea that they may be easily discharged or “restricted”, like in the following imaginary justification of John's assertion:

- a) Given that a person and a lady are together in front of me;
- b) assuming from the behaviour that the person near the lady is the husband;
- c) the person behaves with kind gestures and words; therefore
- d) her husband is kind to her.

Here step b) contains a false assumption; but the assumption works just in order to find an expression to refer to the person introduced in a). Therefore the particular assumption b) can be discharged later, if needed, in front of new information; however the conclusion can be kept. We need only to update the descriptive means, abandoning the “wrong” definite description, and keeping the relevant content, saying something like:

16) The man who appeared to be her husband is kind to her.

To interpret with charity the approximate assertions of our interlocutors implies to treat their descriptions as incomplete and provisional. This amounts to claim that a definite description, intended as a short way to refer to some individual, is *essentially* incomplete.⁷ I refer here to the abundant literature on “incomplete” definite descriptions, like “the book”, where there is more than one book and you need the context to fill some gaps of the description in order to have a defined content and therefore a complete proposition (see for instance Neale, 2004, p. 93 ff). Why don't we assume that this kind of incompleteness can be generalized to most, if not all, definite descriptions? Natural languages have too many possible contexts that it is almost impossible to consider a definite description “complete” without any reference to the context of utterance and the cognitive contexts of the participants to the conversation (see Penco, 2010). Therefore we may take any definite description as if it were a linguistic expression which is only *a first approximation* to a proper description; with some ingenuity we may find a context in which it does not work unless with some specifications and new formulations; in our case an instance of reformulation of “her husband”, coherent with the intentions of the speaker, might be, in analogy of (15) above:

⁷ We have more precise definite descriptions in scientific settings and in legal settings, where the epistemic requirement is stronger than in everyday language. The problem of incomplete description has been abundantly treated with an “implicit” or “explicit” strategies, according to whom we rely on context or we may enrich the set of properties. See Neale 2004.

(17) “the person in front of me whose behaviour makes me think he is the husband of the relevant lady in the scene”.

This is different from the normal set of “completing” properties, as it is usually assumed in standard treatments of incomplete descriptions (as hinted above). Here the completion concerns the explicit expression of our epistemic condition: the limited epistemic access to the relevant information available to the speaker. Normally, in everyday conversation, we do not make our limited epistemic access explicit, but we know it and we normally take it for granted when entertaining a normal conversation. Therefore we may consider it a standard or a convention we normally tacitly take into account⁸.

A possible conclusion might be that any referential description should be accepted by default, as if it were by default correct, with the implicit acknowledgment that we may always find some possible situation in which the description fails to be correct, and needs reformulation. But this should also be the case of the interlocutor who believes to know the truth. Also the interlocutor may fail to know the truth of the matter, given that everyday conversation is linked to time and with time states of affairs change and what we knew as true may become false (a husband may divorce, a lover may become a husband, and so on). We need therefore to use a

⁸ Apparently this phenomenon does not seem to belong to the general problem of aponic elements in linguistic exchange (on which see Neale 2016). However it is something we would represent as general background assumption that triggers the possibility of loose talk, grounded on a trade off between reliability and efficiency or between precision of descriptions and getting to the point (see Bach, 1984, p. 45 and Neale, 2004, p. 103).

generalized default principle of charity which assumes that definite descriptions are always a first approximation to better descriptions, and are to be taken in contexts as a short way to refer to somebody with the best possible mean at hand for the purpose of referring.

The context of utterance shows whether the use of the description is referential or attributive, that is whether we use descriptions (i) to refer to somebody when we don't want to use other directly referential means (indexicals or gestures), or (ii) to look for somebody we have not yet individuated in the present scene.

Truth is fixed only in context; everything we say is a mixture of different features that need effort to be extracted and to be judged as true or false. But we have the default principle of charity that suggest us to take for true the most relevant aspects of the conversation, and suggest to remark the aspects of falsity, also when they are not actually relevant for the goals of the conversation, with great care. In this case Dialogue (II) should be the standard, not dialogue (I). Why this charitable attitude? Well, because of our epistemic uncertainty; granting sincerity condition for an assertion, we cannot give it for granted the truth of *our* viewpoint in a conversation; things could always be different (the man in the scene might have been the husband in disguise).

5 Conclusions

After giving a short justification of the idea of pragmatic ambiguity, connected with the arguments once used by Stalnaker to justify Donnellan's suggestion, I have distinguished two aspects in the debate on referential and attributive uses of descriptions: the problem of belief

report and of belied update using an example discussed by Kripke (1977). In the first case we need to find a way to make explicit the different viewpoints of the speaker and the reporter. In the second we need to find the best way to help the speaker to update his beliefs.

I have shown that we may have a way to translate Kripke's first dialogue in a way that (i) renders the different viewpoints clear, inside a unificationist view (a repair of Russell's analysis) and this vindicates Kripke, for whom we may use a quantificational reading for both referential and attributive uses. But we accept this solution at the cost of making the quantificational reading more complex, with the insertion of an epistemological restriction in the logical form.

(ii) permits to justify the referential-attributive uses, showing that the two dialogue are not of the same level, and while Dialogue (II) is "proper", Dialogue (I) is not, because it does not follow Grice's cooperation principle given that it changes the aim of the conversation and changes the question under discussion.

This analysis brought me to face two further aspects of the ambiguity of Donnellan's distinction. I have shown the possibility to use a sentence as expressing at the same time different propositions depending on the awareness of the speaker of different beliefs or presuppositions entertained by different hearers, showing a new kind of ambiguity. Eventually I have claimed that we need to represent the fundamental and intrinsic limitation of our epistemic access we take for granted in everyday conversation. We may therefore explain our understanding of referential uses of DD, considering it inside the exercise of bounded rationality.

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Carlo Penco

Professor do departamento de filosofia, Universidade de Genova, Itália.

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