

Assertion and Incomplete Definite Descriptions

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ASSERTION AND INCOMPLETE DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS

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I

In a recent paper, Howard Wettstein has argued that Donnellan's referential-attributive distinction is a genuinely semantic distinction and not merely a pragmatic one.¹ I shall argue here that Wettstein does not succeed in establishing his thesis. In so doing, I shall offer certain examples which tend to show that the common phenomenon of so-called indefinite (Donnellan) or incomplete (Tyler Burge) or contextually (David Lewis) definite descriptions – i.e., improper descriptions like 'the table' which, on a given occasion of use, denote a specific object underspecified by the description itself – have a more complex semantics than is sometimes supposed.

Wettstein correctly notes that Donnellan's original, and for some reason controversial, idea that referential uses of definite descriptions succeed in referring to the intended individual regardless of whether that individual in fact satisfies the description, is inessential to the main idea behind the referential-attributive distinction. Given the current dispute over the issue of reference to an individual not satisfying the description, the best way to approach the question of whether the referential-attributive distinction is of semantic significance is precisely as Wettstein proposes: we may sidestep this apparently irrelevant controversy by confining our attention to cases where the intended referent *does* satisfy the description, or to use a terminology employed by both Donnellan and Kripke, cases where, as it happens, speaker's reference and semantic reference coincide.² Following Wettstein, then, I shall restrict my investigation to sentences like 'Smith's murderer is insane', as uttered with the intention of predicating insanity of someone in particular, who, it happens, really is Smith's actual murderer. In such cases, of course, the individual referred to, and consequently the truth-value of what is expressed, are ordinarily unaffected by the fact of whether the description is used referentially or attributively. The question of reference and/or truth-

value with respect to the actual world becomes irrelevant. The referential-attributive distinction will show itself, if at all, in the matter of which proposition is expressed. If the distinction is a genuine semantic distinction, different uses of the description will result in different propositions, in the straightforward sense that the truth-conditions of the sentence, as uttered by the speaker, will depend on whether the description is used referentially or attributively. If the distinction is one with genuine semantic import, then the sentence ‘Smith’s murderer is insane’, when its contained description is used attributively, should express a (partly) general proposition true with respect to a possible world w just in case exactly one person murdered Smith in w and that murderer in w is insane in w ; whereas this same sentence, with the description used referentially, should express a singular proposition true with respect to a possible world w just in case the particular individual Jones, Smith’s *actual* murderer, is insane in w , whether or not he murders Smith in w .³

Wettstein rightly recognizes that it is indeed this alleged difference in propositional content – in the straightforward sense of a divergence in truth-conditions – that lies at the heart of the notion of a semantically significant referential-attributive distinction. Is there really such a divergence? Nobody disagrees that the sentence, when used attributively, expresses a (partly) general proposition which is true if and only if some unique murderer of Smith is insane. But if the sentence is used referentially, will the singular proposition about Jones result instead of the (more) general proposition? That is the question. Let us call it *the question of semantic significance of the referential use*. The *thesis of semantic significance* is the thesis that sentences involving definite descriptions are semantically ambiguous, in the sense that the proposition expressed is either singular or general, in the relevant sense, according as the description is used referentially or attributively.

Wettstein’s argument for semantic significance, briefly, is this. Modifying Donnellan’s original example slightly, a speaker may use a sentence like ‘The murderer is insane’ to make a determinate statement about a contextually relevant murderer, Jones. It is implausible to suppose that the expression ‘the murderer’ must function here as a shorthand or abbreviation for some one proper (i.e., uniquely identifying) description of Jones, such as ‘Harry Smith’s murderer’ or ‘the murderer of Sally Smith’s husband’. For the speaker need not have intended any one such fuller specification of Jones to the exclusion of all the other possible specifications. Several different possible specifica-

tions may have equal claim to conformity with the speaker's intentions, each yielding a different general proposition to the effect that some unique murderer satisfying such-and-such a specification is insane. Yet the speaker's remark is not multiply ambiguous; a fully determinate assertion was made. How can this be possible? The speaker must have used the incomplete specification 'the murderer' referentially, Wettstein argues, and the proposition expressed is the singular proposition about Jones that he is insane. Nevertheless, in another sort of case, a speaker may utter the very same sentence, 'The murderer is insane', using the description attributively to refer to Jones. In this case, the description involves implicit reference to the victim, and has the force of '*his* murderer'. The proposition expressed here is the singular proposition about the victim to the effect that some unique murderer of him is insane. Hence, there is a referential-attributive distinction for expressions like 'the murderer' and 'the table', and the referential use of such expressions is semantically significant.

Incomplete or contextually definite descriptions like 'the table' provide the most difficult case for one, such as myself, who wishes to maintain that the content, or truth-conditions, of a sentence involving a term which, at least at the level of surface syntax, would appear to be a singular definite description, are unaffected by the fact of whether the description is used referentially or attributively. Donnellan (*op. cit.*) urged consideration of incomplete definite descriptions in support of his thesis of semantic significance, arguing that it is not always plausible to regard these phrases as elliptical for some more fully specified descriptive phrase to be supplied by presumed shared background assumptions in the context of use, or something similar. Even Kripke, perhaps the staunchest opponent of the thesis of semantic significance of the referential use in the case of complete definite descriptions, softens his opposition considerably in the case of incomplete descriptions. In 'Speaker's reference and semantic reference' he writes:

Although [Russell's] 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. And it may even be the case that a true picture will resemble various aspects of Donnellan's in important respects...⁴.

...It seems to me likely that 'indefinite' definite descriptions such as 'the table' present

difficulties for a Russellian analysis. It is somewhat tempting to assimilate such descriptions to the corresponding demonstrative (for example, 'that table') and to the extent that such a temptation turns out to be plausible, there may be new arguments in such cases for the intuitions of those who have advocated a rigid vs. non-rigid ambiguity in definite descriptions, or for Donnellan's intuitions concerning the referential case, or for both.⁵

These remarks are hedged, but they strongly suggest that the thesis of semantic significance may prevail, at least with regard to the case of incomplete definite descriptions, for just the reasons urged by Donnellan, Wettstein, and others.

This would be an important concession. By far and away the most common use in ordinary discourse of phrases constructed from the definite article is one that relies on supplementation by the context to secure a definite reference. As Wettstein notes, it would seem that this use is often intended even in cases where, by chance, the form of words chosen already happens to fit something uniquely, without further reliance on the context. Kripke's contention that the referential use has only pragmatic significance rings hollow if it has to be restricted to a class of rarely used, if not entirely artificial, expressions.

II

Does the case of incomplete definite descriptions show that the referential use is semantically significant, in the sense defined earlier? H. P. Grice draws a distinction between what he calls *utterer's meaning* and *sentence meaning*.⁶ The former notion is pragmatic: what the speaker means in uttering a particular sentence. The latter notion is semantic: what the sentence itself means. Following Grice, Kripke has distinguished between speaker's reference and semantic reference in arguing against the existence of a semantic referential-attributive ambiguity. Kripke's arguments, however, are aimed at least to some extent against the stronger thesis that referentially used definite descriptions denote the intended individual – the speaker's referent – even if that individual does not actually satisfy the description, i.e., even if that individual is not the semantic referent. We have agreed to set aside such cases in order to investigate the more restricted question of semantic significance, as I have defined it. With respect to our question – whether referential use results in a singular proposition about the referent – a distinction such as Grice's in terms of sentence meaning, or propositional content, is the relevant one. Let us distinguish between what I shall call the *speaker assertion* and the

semantic content of a particular sentence utterance. The semantic content of an utterance may be identified with the proposition expressed by the uttered sentence with respect to the context of the utterance. If the sentence contains demonstratives or other context-sensitive items, it will express a different proposition with respect to different contexts of use. Hence, the general notion of semantic content is relativized to the context of use. The speaker assertion of an utterance is whatever proposition, if any, the speaker succeeds in asserting by performing the utterance. Speaker assertion is a pragmatic notion.

Of course, one hopes and expects that speaker assertion and semantic content will ordinarily bear a close relation to one another. In particular, one hopes and expects that on at least some occasions, in fact in any ordinary circumstances, if a speaker utters a sentence, he or she thereby asserts the very same proposition which is the semantic content of the sentence with respect to that context of use. But the fact that speaker assertion and semantic content may diverge is a familiar one. Rhetorical questions express no declarative proposition as semantic content, though that does not prevent the speaker from asserting some declarative proposition in the utterance. If a parent disciplines her child by yelling at him, "You will eat your spinach", or better, "You will eat your spinach and like it!", the semantic content may be false, though the parent may have intended to be construed as issuing a directive, and not as making a true-or-false prediction. In cases of irony or sarcasm, the speaker may succeed in asserting the very negation of the semantic content of his or her words. More importantly for the present purpose, in uttering a sentence with only a single proposition as semantic content, the speaker may nevertheless succeed in asserting several different propositions simultaneously. I believe, for example, that ordinarily, in asserting the general proposition that the so-and-so is such-and-such, the speaker may be plausibly regarded as having automatically also asserted the materially equivalent, but not strictly equivalent, singular proposition about the so-and-so that it (he or she) is such-and-such.⁷ If I am correct, then in many utterances, speaker assertion and semantic content must be distinguished, if only because the former outnumber the latter. In case of semantic ambiguity, this situation is precisely reversed: semantic contents outnumber speaker's assertion.

Insofar as speaker assertion and semantic content diverge, the question of semantic significance of the referential use is concerned primarily with semantic content and not speaker assertion. The question is whether a sentence like

'Smith's murderer is insane' expresses the singular proposition about Jones as its content with respect to a context in which the sentence is used referentially, rather than the (more) general proposition true with respect to a possible world w just in case Smith's murderer in w is insane in w . This question is concerned primarily and directly with the content of *the very words* 'Smith's murderer is insane', and at least not directly with what the speaker may succeed in asserting or conveying to his or her audience. Wettstein's discussion, like Donnellan's original paper and most other discussions of these and related issues, suffers from a failure to keep separate the notions of speaker assertion and semantic content. Our main concern is with what the *words* express as their semantic content *with respect to* the relevant context of use. In order to establish the thesis of semantic significance of the referential use, it will not do simply to show that in using a sentence referentially one thereby asserts the relevant singular proposition. For the speaker may also assert a relevant general proposition simultaneously. In any case, the relevant question is not what the speaker manages to assert, but what his or her words express.

Wettstein's argument for semantic significance of the referential use by way of incomplete definite descriptions can be reformulated to focus explicitly on semantic content. But when the issue is sharpened in this way, much, if not all, of the intuitive force behind his argument seems to vanish. Consider again Wettstein's example of the speaker's utterance of 'The murderer is insane', using the incomplete description 'the murderer' referentially to refer to Jones. It is plausible to maintain that the speaker asserts (at least) the singular proposition about Jones that he is insane. But I, for one, find it much less plausible to suppose that the proposition expressed by the sentence, as completed by the contextual factors of the occasion of use – i.e., the semantic content of the sentence – is this same singular proposition rather than some more general proposition to the effect that the murderer relevant to certain interests or to a certain *situation*, as delineated by the context, is insane. A proponent of the semantic significance thesis such as Wettstein, must maintain that the sentence 'The murderer is insane', as used on this occasion, is true with respect to any possible world in which Jones is insane, even if Smith is alive and well, Jones is no murderer at all, and in fact, no murders are committed by anyone anywhere. It seems quite clear, however, that the sentence 'The murderer is insane' is not true with respect to such a world, and indeed, it seems quite clear that the phrase 'the murderer' does not denote

anyone, not even Jones, with respect to such a world.

Consider also the following kind of example. Suppose that the speaker, upon taking a closer look at the suspect, recognizes him to be his child's babysitter, Jones. He may exclaim with great terror and alarm "My gosh! The murderer is *Jones*; Jones is the babysitter; the murderer and the babysitter are one and the same!" We may suppose that in each occurrence the singular terms involved are used referentially. Notice here that the two descriptions 'the murderer' and 'the babysitter' are incomplete. Now I believe that a case can be made for the hypothesis that among the things accomplished by the speaker in his outburst were three consecutive assertings of a certain singular proposition about Jones, namely, the necessary truth about Jones that he and himself are identical. But even so, that has to do with speaker assertion, rather than with the primary question of semantic content. A proponent of the semantic significance thesis should maintain that each of the three identity statements uttered expresses this same singular proposition as its semantic content with respect to the relevant context. That would mean that the three sentences express necessary truths, (or at least propositions true with respect to every possible world in which Jones exists). But it is quite clear that *none* of the three sentences express necessary truths. While it may be true that the murderer and the babysitter are in fact Jones, surely it is not a *necessary* truth that the murderer is one and the same person as the babysitter. The sentence 'The murderer and the babysitter are identical' cannot be true with respect to a possible world in which the speaker has no children, Smith has no murderer, and Jones, though he exists, is neither murderer nor babysitter. In fact, a proponent of the thesis of semantic significance must make the implausible claim that the sentence 'The murderer and the babysitter are identical' is true even with respect to a possible world in which there are no murderers or babysitters, as long as Jones exists there.⁸ Faced with examples such as these, and backed against the distinction between speaker assertion and semantic content, I see no convincing defensive strategy for the thesis of semantic significance.

III

One important question raised by these examples remains unanswered. How do incomplete descriptions such as 'the murderer' and 'the babysitter' manage to secure a definite reference when their content is incomplete, and therefore

inadequate to do the job alone? As Donnellan, Kripke, and Wettstein all note, it is not always plausible to regard such phrases as elliptical for some more fully specified yet thoroughly descriptive phrases floating in reach just overhead. Yet my examples suggest that descriptive content is crucial in securing reference, at least to the extent that nothing failing to satisfy what little descriptive content there is to be found in the wording may count as the semantic referent. What then supplements this meager descriptive content to achieve the definite reference? This is the keenest and most pressing question raised in Wettstein's paper. What I should want to suggest is, in effect, a certain unified account, which combines the differing accounts offered by Wettstein of the referential and attributive uses of incomplete descriptions like 'the murderer' into a single semantic treatment of incomplete descriptions. It is important to notice in this connection that, despite Wettstein's argument against the strategy of regarding incomplete descriptions as elliptical for complete ones, his own account of the attributive use of 'the murderer' seems to involve something very much like treating it as elliptical for '*his* murderer' or 'the murderer of *that* one'. But I leave the details of such an alternative account for another time.

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NOTES

¹ 'Demonstrative reference and definite descriptions', *Philosophical Studies* 40 (1981), pp. 241–257. The present paper was originally delivered as commentary on Wettstein's paper at a meeting of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association on March 28, 1980. For an argument similar in outline to Wettstein's, see Michael Devitt, 'Donnellan's distinction', in French, Uehling, and Wettstein (eds.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy VI: The Foundations of Analytic Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1981), pp. 511–524.

² See Keith Donnellan, 'Speaker reference, descriptions, and anaphora', and Saul Kripke, 'Speaker's reference and semantic reference', in French, Uehling, and Wettstein (eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1979) pp. 6–27, and 28–44, respectively. Donnellan's use of the term 'speaker's reference' does not quite coincide with Kripke's; Donnellan reserves the term for the so-called 'referential' case, in which there is someone in particular to whom the speaker intends to refer, whereas Kripke applies the term also to cases in which the speaker has only the general intention to refer to whoever is the semantic referent. I shall conform to Kripke's usage throughout.

³ The terminology of 'singular' and 'general' propositions is David Kaplan's. See his 'Dthat' in French et al, pp. 383–400. I call the first proposition *partly* general because even it is singular with respect to the position occupied by Smith, though it is general with respect to the position occupied by Smith's murderer. To use Russellian jargon,

Smith does, but his murderer does not, *occur as a constituent* of the first proposition. This situation is reversed in the second proposition.

⁴ Op. cit., pp. 6–7.

⁵ Ibid., p. 22.

⁶ See his 'Utterer's meaning, sentence-meaning and word meaning', *Foundations of Language* 4 (1968), pp. 225–242.

⁷ Cf. John Searle, 'Referential and attributive', *Monist* 62 (1979), pp. 190–208, where a distinction is drawn between primary and secondary illocutionary acts performed in a single utterance by way of (what Donnellan calls) a referential use of a definite description. Searle rejects the referential-attributive distinction, as it is drawn by Donnellan. His objections are extended also to the *de re-de dicto* distinction, as it is sometimes drawn, and would no doubt be meant to apply to the referential-attributive distinction as it is drawn by Wettstein in his attempt to resurrect the semantic significance thesis. I do not accept Searle's objections to either the referential-attributive distinction or the *de re-de dicto* distinction (taken as a distinction between types of propositions), but I find the independent idea of a distinction between primary and secondary speaker assertions in a single utterance both plausible and a serious obstacle to Wettstein's argument for the semantic significance thesis. Unlike Searle, I maintain that one of the speaker assertions – what Searle calls the primary one – made by means of a referential use is a singular proposition, rather than some further general proposition independent of the semantic content literally expressed.

⁸ Another sort of example that presents difficulties for the thesis of semantic significance is the following: Suppose that the speaker, cautioning against letting the accused man in the dock off too easily on grounds of insanity, reminds his audience of the seriousness of the crime by asserting referentially 'Let us not forget that the murderer has killed someone'. Again, it can be plausibly maintained that in uttering this sentence, the speaker asserted a singular proposition about Jones, the man in the dock, one which is true with respect to all and only those possible worlds in which Jones has killed someone. But this concerns speaker assertion rather than semantic content. A proponent of the semantic significance thesis must maintain that the sentence 'The murderer has killed someone' also expresses this very same singular proposition as its semantic content with respect to the relevant context. But this singular proposition about Jones is entirely contingent and *a posteriori*. If Jones had not been insane, it might not have come to pass that he would become a killer. On the other hand, it seems difficult to maintain that the sentence 'The murderer has killed someone' does not express a (nearly) *analytic* truth, or at least one true with respect to every possible world in which Smith is murdered by a lone killer, whether or not that killer is Jones. Nevertheless, I believe that the latter view can be plausibly and consistently maintained while denying the thesis of semantic significance. Although I myself sometimes have some inclination towards this line, I shall not defend it here. For present purposes, it is sufficient to point out that the question of *rigidity* of incomplete definite descriptions, which is at issue here, though entailed by the thesis of semantic significance, does not *depend* on it. Incomplete descriptions may *turn out* to be rigid in much the same way that some complete descriptions do, e.g., 'the even prime integer'.