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 Truth, Assertion and Charity

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I discuss the relation between truth and assertion, starting from an example by Leonard Linsky which has been used in the debate on definite description by Keith Donnellan and Saul Kripke. 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 context of reception, or the cognitive context. If the cognitive context is given the right relevance we may even accept the possibility to speak of "pragmatic ambiguity" as Donnellan did. However I will not give a definite answer to the debate between Donnellan and Kripke, but I will try to show that there is a moral to be drawn by the discussion: it is advisable to use truth attribution in a charitable way if we want to entertain conversation with people who have beliefs not necessarily similar to ours.¹

1. The topic

Truth is related to assertion: we assert what we hold true. This definition is intuitively correct; however people often assert what they do not hold true (and what they hold true, but it is actually false). Given that an assertion is the utterance of a sentence aiming to express the truth, speech act theory helps to clarify the intuitive definition. There are at least three kinds of conditions of an assertion²:

- (i) *constitutive condition*: an assertion *should* be true. An assertion is something which is essentially connected with truth. If an assertion is not true, it *must* be rejected, even if the speaker sincerely believes what she says.
- (ii) *justification requirement*: to assert something, the speaker should be *entitled* to do that, that is, she should have reasons, justifications of the truth of what is asserted³.
- (iii) *sincerity condition*: the speaker *must* believe that what she asserts is true. As Moore remarked, we cannot assert "*p* and I don't believe that *p*".

Shortly: for an assertion to be a "well formed" speech act, it needs to be true, justified and sincere; we need all these three conditions to be fulfilled; if some of them is missing, we have different kinds of failures or, as Austin would say, "infelicities" or flaws or abuses:

- (i) *falsity*: an assertion of something false is to be rejected, not because the speaker does not believe the content of assertion, but because an assertion is intended to say something true. However there is something peculiar to the act of asserting: we may

¹ I wish to thank Claudia Bianchi, Diego Marconi, Marina Sbisà and Massimiliano Vignolo for comments on (parts of) an early version of the paper and the students of my lectures on Russell (Reykjavik 2005), for their stimulating suggestions on the debate between Kripke and Donnellan.

² I don't enter the discussion whether these are "constitutive" or "felicity" conditions, neither whether which is the ultimate constitutive condition. Williamson 2000 (p. 243 ff.) claims that the real constitutive condition of assertion is the "knowledge rule" for which one asserts *p* only if one *knows* *p*. Without entering the metaphysical and epistemological debate on knowledge I will keep the more modest claim that we need at least the three conditions given above, as minimal condition for a full and well formed assertion.

³ Besides, as Brandom 1994 remarks, we also are and should be *committed* to the consequences of an assertion. This last point is relevant to the question of belief updating, because reaching a contradiction in what follows from our assertions compels us to revise our set of beliefs.

say that the speaker has made an assertion, and that the assertion is false and therefore is to be rejected, but we cannot say that the assertion has not been done. It is not a standard case of “misfire” – as Austin intends it – where the action has not been done, as it happens in the case of a promise of something which apparently I am unable to fulfil. If I promise to give you the moon, I have not made a promise, but a joke. In the case of an assertion, if the content of the assertion is false, but the speaker sincerely believes it to be true, we have an assertion which does not reach its purpose. We reject the content because false, but we accept the fact the speaker has uttered a false assertion, or – more modestly – an assertion we judge false.

(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. Even if we do not accept that we may assert only what we know, we should recognize that assertion is not simply the expression of an opinion or a guess, but something which requires to be in the position to make an assertion, which requires to be granted, warranted. A speaker may say something false (intentionally or by mistake), and still be entitled to make an assertion. He is not *entitled* to make an assertion, when he lacks justification, and therefore cannot perform a proper full blown act of asserting, but only *pretends* to perform it. Shortly: we assert only what we can justify, if not we do not have the right to make a proper assertion.⁴

(iii) *abuse of sincerity*: to assert something believing it to be false is an *abuse* of the convention of asserting. However we have cases of politicians and professional liars who abuse the institution of assertion quite regularly. The abuse concerns their intentions and sentiments, but not the assertion itself. If an assertion is uttered with the intention to tell the false, we may judge badly the speaker but still regard the assertion independently of her intentions. It may happen that a persons says something true, contrary to her beliefs and intentions. In front of an assertion, independently of the intentions of the speaker, we have always the right to ask: is it true?

2. The problem

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) This paper is intended to be a contribution to the concept of “content of an assertion”. I will dedicate most of the paper to commenting a classical example invented by Leonard Linsky (1963): looking at a man who treats kindly a nearby woman, John sincerely asserts: “her husband is kind to her”. Now, assuming as Linsky does, that the lady has no husband, what should we say of the assertion?

Linsky claims that the assertion should be neither true nor false, following a Frege-Strawson attitude. Keith Donnellan (1966) claims that Linsky's answer may work

⁴ (This holds good also if we accept that in order to assert we need to know what we assert). There is an ambiguity in saying that *we* should have justifications for our assertions. The term “we” can mean, on the one hand that there must be objective and socially recognized justifications which ground the truth of the assertion; on the other hand that the speaker should *possess* some justification, even if this justification is not actually socially shared. As we shall see, a justification should however be at least capable of being understood and shared also by others.

for the *attributive* use of the definite description, when the description is applied to whoever fits the description. But it does not, if the expression “her husband” has a *referential* use, when the description is applied to the relevant person which happens to be referred to by the speaker thought the description. In this last case it is clear that John says *something* true. I think that the speech act theory can be of some help here, even if we need to enrich the analysis of the three conditions described above.

Let us take the challenge of Linsky in a simplified way, avoiding the complications of non denoting expressions: let us therefore assume that the husband exists and he is not a kind person. On the one hand, even if the intention of John is to tell the truth, the assertion seems to be literally false. On the other hand John says certainly something true: the person he is referring to is kind. Therefore *we* should say that he says at the same time something true (that person is kind) and something false (the husband is kind). Even Donnellan 1966 (§VIII) recognizes that, if the expression “her husband” is used referentially, it is not clear *which* is the *true* statement that John makes. We are therefore brought to ask *how* can we judge the truth of his assertion and *which* is the content of his assertion. I will offer short drafts of different arguments whose main point will be eventually the defence of a concept of “pragmatic ambiguity”, that is the idea that an assertion may have at the same time different contents depending on different cognitive contexts⁵. Assuming the availability of the concept of pragmatic ambiguity we will discuss the problem to devise the best strategies to resolve it, at least provisionally.

3. Making viewpoints explicit: Undertaking or rejecting

Donnellan had a good insight when he did not accept the idea that the content of John's assertion is neither true nor false, claiming there is something true. But what is the content of the assertion? One of the difficulties of these kinds of cases is due to the lack of attention to the interplay between different viewpoints. Most reports of belief, when reporting the words of the speaker, actually do not make explicit the interplay of the points of view of speaker and reporter⁶. The problems of belief reports derive from the lack of clarity of the interplay of the different points of view involved.

We cannot report John's belief saying “John believes that her husband is kind to her”, unless we are ready to *undertake* his beliefs (that the man is her husband). We might then express the content of his assertion with the one of the two following sentences: “John says of the person *he believes* to be her husband, that he is kind to her” or: “John says that the person, he believes to be her husband, is kind to her”.⁷ In this way we make it clear that we do not undertake John's belief, but – on the contrary – we take

⁵ An assertion with an indexical has different contents depending on different contexts of utterances. This might be intended as a proper part of a case of pragmatic ambiguity, which is, however, not exhausted by this feature of indexicals, because it is connected both with the context of utterance and with the cognitive context. I make the distinction for the sake of simplicity, even if cognitive contexts or sets of presupposition (either shared or individual ones) might be and have been considered as a proper part of the context of utterance. I will not use the terms “context of interpretation” or “context of reception (which can be different from the context of utterance)” to avoid unnecessary complication. The distinctions of different levels and kinds of contexts is always relevant, but using only two kinds of contexts will be of some help in our short paper.

⁶ The idea that reports of belief have to express different *points of view* in the game has been very much developed after Brandom's *Making it Explicit*; I have devoted some attention to that in Penco 2006.

⁷ 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. However it may find some clarification in the scope of quantifiers. On the importance of scope in treating definite description see Kripke 1997 and 2005.

distance from it⁸. Therefore our report is both on John's point of view and on our own. This can be rendered also with a wide scope quantification both on what we accept as a fact (the there is a person who is kind with her) and John's beliefs (that the kind person is her husband). Assuming that John is wrong, and assuming "Kind" and "Husband" as two places relations, an intuitive simplified rendering of a report on the content of John's assertion might be:

$\exists x \exists y (\text{Kind}(x,y) \ \& \ \text{John believes}(\text{Husband}(x,y)))$

With this rendering we make it clear that we do not commit ourselves to John's beliefs. In the content of John's assertion there is therefore something true and something false, and we have to make it clear. Actually we make clear *our* point of view with our commitments or our agnosticism.

4. *Belief update: a test for semantic or pragmatic interpretation*

Certainly, while it is difficult to report the content of John's assertion correctly, it is really a small step to help him to change his mind. Saul Kripke (1975) suggests two ways of cutting off John's wrong beliefs:

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 claims that we have to distinguish the speaker's reference from the semantic reference, in analogy with the Gricean distinction between speaker's meaning and semantic meaning, without postulating a semantic ambiguity of a definite description in terms of attributive and referential uses. His aim is to show the robustness of his distinction (speaker's reference and semantic reference), and a weakness in the distinction between "attributive" and "referential" use of a description, as indicating a semantic ambiguity. Which conceptual tool is more apt to treat these kind of case should be revealed by the capacity of explaining the proper functioning of these dialogs.

In dialogue (I) B uses "he" to refer to the semantic referent of "her husband", while in dialogue (II) B uses "he" to refer to the speaker's referent. Kripke argues that the first dialogue would be impossible to explain with the conceptual tools given by Donnellan; in fact, in the first dialogue, B's assertion is possible only in the case B *misunderstands* the speaker's use of "her husband" as attributive, while apparently A

⁸ 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 has widely discussed. 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 report: John says that the person he believes *erroneously* 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).

uses it referentially⁹. This difficulty to explain the first dialogue is considered by Kripke as evidence against Donnellan's distinction, taken as an example of semantic ambiguity.

Granting Kripke's point¹⁰ there is still something left in the Donnellan-Kripke debate. Kripke criticizes Donnellan *as if* he imposed a semantic ambiguity on the word "the". However Donnellan himself was negative on that and was well aware that the dimension of the problem was at a pragmatic level¹¹. Part of the debate is therefore flawed by this original mismatch. To claim that the distinction between referential and attributive uses of descriptions can be "accommodated" by a distinction between speaker's and semantic reference does not seem to run counter Donnellan's *main* point. Besides, postulating a *semantic* ambiguity of the word "the" seems to push too far the Donnellan's direction of thought. Donnellan is not giving a lexical analysis of "the", but a pragmatic analysis of the phenomenon of using descriptions in different contexts; we cannot identify semantic ambiguity and diversity of contexts of uses.

Independently of the choice of the conceptual tools, the two dialogues discussed above seem to show that the truth of an assertion is dependent on the context of interpretation. In the dialogues (I) and (II), the same assertion of A is interpreted as expressing two different contents. This does not mean that the content of an assertion may be true and false at the same time, but that an assertion may really produce more than one content with the same lexical elements in use, depending on the audience; in the dialogues we may extract different interpretations, even if it is not clear how they have been derived. Different suggestions are at hand. I will say something on two of them: a first suggestion comes from the traditional distinction between cognitive and semantic aspect of an assertion; a second suggestion is linked to the role given to justifications.

5. Individuating procedures in context

The contrast between cognitive and semantic aspects of meaning is typically presented as a contrast between Fregean and Kripkean intuitions. However the contrast is already implicit in Frege's writings. On the one hand, Frege identifies sense with truth

⁹ To make things clearer Kripke suggests to compare two languages: an ambiguous Donnellan-language where a definite description has two meaning, an attributive and a referential one, and an unambiguous Russellian language, enriched with the notions of speakers' referent and semantic referent. If the two language behave in the same way, it would be difficult to choose between them; but if one of the two make the explanation of some case of normal dialogues almost impossible, it would be a case against one of the two hypothesis.

¹⁰ For the sake of the discussion. Actually Kripke's paper has given the opportunity to scholars to build two teams: pragmatic interpretation versus semantic interpretation (see for instance Neale 2004). However it seems to me that Kripke's conclusion are too quick; my claim is that Kripke does not consider that speakers *shift* from attributive to referential use with great facility, as a way to express their commitments and their undertaking or rejecting the beliefs of the interlocutors. The second part of the answer given by B shows that *B understands* the referential use of the interlocutor, while the first part of the answer *B uses* "her husband" attributively, and it openly does so. The tacit agreement on these shifts of attributive and referential uses in the dialogue is a typical ability of speakers when they realize differences of beliefs, and the verbal expression is accompanied with gestures, tone of voice, visual expressions and direction of the eyes. The analysis given by Kripke does not seem therefore to be conclusive in dismantling the idea of a semantic ambiguity and a choice of a Russell-language against a Donnellan-language. We may imagine a dialogue in D-language where B says: "*the* husband is not; *zhe* husband is, but he is not *the* husband". However recent suggestions goes towards the conclusion that, under certain interpretations, "the arguments for or against an ambiguity in the definite article lose much of their initial interest" (Neale 2006, p. 23). And I will not develop the argument here.

¹¹ Donnellan 1966 (§VII) wondered whether the presence of an ambiguity could account for the dual use of a definite description. He said that the sentence containing a definite description "is not syntactically ambiguous nor does it seem at all attractive to suppose an ambiguity in the meaning of the words" and concluded: "perhaps we should say that the sentence is *pragmatically ambiguous*" (my underline).

conditions, on the other hand Fregean sense has to do with the cognitive procedures used by the speaker¹². To give an example on which I have elaborated more widely elsewhere¹³, let us take the cognitive diversity of two logically equivalent sentences like $A \rightarrow B$ and $\neg (A \& \neg B)$. In a letter to Husserl, Frege claims that they express the same thought, the same truth conditions. Still the same truth conditions are arrived at in different ways: the two formulas have different computational complexity; they are computed with different steps. Logical and mathematical formula are a paradigmatic example of the distinction between semantic sense intended as truth conditions (intensions) and cognitive sense intended as (computational) procedures attached to the intensions.

We have different procedures to pick an individual in context, definite and indefinite descriptions, pronouns, indexicals, proper names. It is usually assumed that a rigid designator like a proper name picks the same individual in all possible worlds; this means that a proper name or other rigid designators express constant functions from possible worlds to the same individual. What role can we give to the relation between rigid designators and other linguistic and conceptual tools? An intuitive answer is that for each constant function there may be many different associated procedures which pick the individual at different worlds; possibly different procedures at each world.

What if the description is apparently not fitting the individual, as in the case of "the lady's husband" used to refer to the lover? Against Linsky's view for which the speaker says something which is neither true nor false, Donnellan insists in saying that "there is no reason to suppose that he has not said something true or false about him" and that "he may have stated something true or false even if nothing fits the description" (§VIII). In fact, in the referential use, or in case of speaker's reference, we are saying something literally false of the individual we are referring to. The description however may work as a kind of indexical¹⁴, and we may say that the assertion has an definite truth condition: the assertion is true if and only if the person referred to by the use of certain words in the context has the property he has (in the example; the assertion that her husband is kind to her is true if the person referred to by the use of "her husband" is kind to her). Once we have determined in the context which individual is referred to, also with a "wrong" description, we will refer to him and check whether what is said of him it is true or false.

6. *Default justifications and shifting contexts*

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 our justification requirement: given the inferential aspect of a *good* speech act, we should ask *which* justification can be given for an assertion. In the case discussed here it is easy to understand John – unless he had been intentionally told 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

¹² See for instance Beaney 1994 and Penco 2008.

¹³ See Penco 2003b.

¹⁴ We may think to Schiffer's hidden-indexical theory (Schiffer 1995), or to Kripke's rigidifying descriptions; the point is that a description may always be used to refer to an individual and begin an anaphoric or local causal chain, with the possibility to reject the description later (while keeping the connection to the individual previously indicated)

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.

An hearer ignorant of the facts can easily accept the assertion as something true of the person John is referring to. If other relevant information enter the set of beliefs, for instance the hearer comes to know that the woman have an unkind husband who is not identical with the person referred to by John, the sentence can be interpreted as expressing a different content. Having at the same time different sets of information belonging to different audiences the hearer might oscillate: John said something true of the person he referred to with the description in respect to some audience, and he said something false of the person fitting the description he erroneously used for another audience. In this case we are realizing that John expressed with one sentence two possible contents or propositions.

This does not mean that the sentence has a lexical ambiguity (as if "the husband" or just "the" had two different meanings). More coherently with Frege's conception that a sentence sometimes express less than a complete thought or proposition, because it needs contextual features to express a proposition¹⁵, we take the expression "her husband is kind to her" to express different propositions when (i) uttered in the context where the lover is apparently the relevant person for the audience, and (ii) uttered in the context where the presuppositions of the audience pointed to the actual husband.

If we take care of the cognitive context (the set of shared assumptions and justifications) and not only on the standard "context of the utterance" (speaker, time and location) we need to make a more complex assessment of the propositions involved: in case (i) the speaker asserted something true of the person he wanted to refer to, even if his description was not fitting, but was used by default as a shorthand description to pick the individual in the context (as in the notorious case of the man drinking martini); (ii) the speaker unintentionally uttered something semantically evaluable (false in our case) from the point of view of people with relevant information of the marital status of the lady.

7. Pragmatic ambiguity and charity principle

We have just considered a case where the same sentence expresses two different contents, two different truth conditions, depending on the beliefs entertained by the audience (depending on their accessibility to right information). Contra what it is normally accepted - that we cannot speak of pragmatic, but only of semantic ambiguity – I think we have here a case of what could be properly called "pragmatic ambiguity". The ambiguity is that the same utterance can be interpreted as two different speech acts, therefore giving different contents. This difference of speech acts may depend on different hearers and their different presuppositions. This ambiguity might even be done intentionally; a speaker, acknowledging the different sets of presuppositions of two different hearers, may assert "her husband is kind to her" to mean (i) that the relevant person of the scene is kind to the lady (thinking of a short way to convey this content to

¹⁵ Speaking of sentences Frege 1918 (p.64) says that "the mere wording, which can be made permanent by writing or the gramophone, does not suffice for the expression of the thought" and continues: "the knowledge of certain conditions accompanying the utterance, which are used as means of expressing the thoughts, is needed for us to grasp the thought correctly. Pointing the finger, hand gestures, glances may belong here too."

an hearer ignorant of the marital status of the lady) and (ii) that the actual husband is kind to her lady because he is so permissive to leave her in intimate affairs with a lover (thinking that this would be the default interpretation of an hearer who is acquainted with the real husband). Here the two interpretations give different contents because they pick different referents for "her husband". But the act themselves can be considered different, and their diversity goes hand in hand with the difference of contents. In the first case we have an assertion which could be classified as a simple *act of describing of a scene*, while in the second case we have an assertion which should be better classified as an *act of mockery*, relying on a judgement on a situation whose elements are well known to the speakers¹⁶.

Using the same utterance to make two different acts which intentionally produce different contents for different hearers is not the usual way of speaking (it is sometimes used by politicians and members of the mafia); but when presuppositions of hearers are taken into consideration, and when speaker's and semantic reference split, an ambiguity of the kind is possible (notice that we are not treating a case of a difference between what is asserted and what is implicated; it is exactly the content of the assertion which splits in two, depending on different hearers and double intentions of a malicious speaker). Assuming the provisional notion of pragmatic ambiguity, which strategy shall we have in assigning truth conditions to these kinds of assertions? We need to define *which* proposition is considered, relying on the most probably shared presuppositions of the audience in the context of the utterance and on the kind of speech act which has been performed. This amounts to give some *default* assumptions about what is going on in the conversation, about whom is referred to by an expression in a context, or about presuppositions or implicatures which may be always cancelled in face of new information.

Treating cases where the speaker's referent and the semantic reference split – or where there is an oscillation between referential and attributive use – a good strategy would be to use a *charity principle*. We may decide to give the preference to one of the two possible interpretations, – one of the two possible propositions expressed by a sentence. Which of the two? We should choose the one which probably is more coherent with the speaker's beliefs and intentions, checking or imagining his justifications of the use of a particular description. It is a question of fairness: we might take the sentence at face value (as semantic reference or attributive use) or we might take into consideration the "intended" reference which can be more probably extracted by the mixed presupposition of the participants to the conversation.

A conversation, more charitable toward John's reasons, will use Dialogue (II), here a little extended:

Dialogue (II) A: "Her husband is kind to her"

B: "He is kind to her, but he isn't her husband; her husband is not"

¹⁶ This interpretation is "forced" to make the difference more evident and to vindicate Donnellan's basic intuition on some kind of "pragmatic ambiguity". Somebody might say that we need not go into these details in the classification of speech acts, and we should be happy with the plain notion of assertion. I don't pursue the discussion here, where the example makes the differences between two acts not easy to detect; however, speaking of "pragmatic ambiguity" requires speaking of difference of *acts* and other cases may be more evident (like the uncertainty whether an act is a question or a command – and it can be both, depending on the audience).

This answer amounts to saying that A's assertion says *primarily* something true of the man A is referring to; secondarily that he says something false concerning whoever fits the description. B's answer in this case implicitly recognizes the possible *justifications* for the utterance, and it keeps the conversation going, accepting the part of truth expressed by the assertion as *the most relevant contribution* to the conversation. This charitable interpretation explains how people can so easily understand each other even in front of vague and literally incorrect assertions.

8. Default assumptions and essentially incomplete definite descriptions

This attitude would help us to make speakers more rational than they appear when they are interpreted with too stubborn rules. Default assumptions are something we use for the sake of simplicity with the idea that may be easily discharged, like in the following imaginary justification of John's assertion:

- 1) Given that a person and a lady are together in front of me;
- 2) assuming from the behaviour that the person near the lady is the husband;
- 3) the husband behaves with certain gestures and words
therefore
- 4) her husband is kind to her.

Here step 2) contains a false assumption; but the assumption is used only to use an expression to refer to the person introduced in 1). Therefore the particular assumption 2) 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:

- 4*) the man who appeared erroneously to be her husband is kind to her.

To interpret with charity the sloppy assertions of our interlocutors implies to treat their descriptions as incomplete and provisional descriptions. This amounts to claim that a definite description, intended as a short way to refer to some individual, is *essentially* incomplete. 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.¹⁷ Why don't we assume that this kind of incompleteness can be generalized to all definite descriptions? Actually no description can be considered absolutely "complete". Take "the actual King of France"; said when? by whom? referring to what? Since Strawson we may invent contexts where "the actual King of France" may find a suitable interpretation with some specification. Natural languages have too many possible contexts of utterance and interpretation that it is almost impossible to consider a definite description "complete" without any reference to context of utterance *and* cognitive

¹⁷ One of the most common interpretation of incomplete definite descriptions is the "Hidden Indexical Theory" which links the incomplete description with some *contextually relevant* completing property. More generally we may speak of "implicit background restriction" which implies assuming that an utterance of the kind "the F is G" can be elliptical for "the F that H is G". See for instance Neale 2004, p.106, but also Buchanan and Ostertag 2005.

contexts of participants to the conversation. Therefore we may take any definite description as if it were a linguistic expression which is only a *first approximation* to a 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 "the person in front of me whose behaviour makes me think he is the husband of the relevant lady in the scene". This is something more than a "completing" property, as it is usually assumed in standard cases of incomplete descriptions; here the completion can be even a re-phrasing of the sentence, therefore something more structured than a completing property or free enrichment. Yet, reformulations of approximate descriptions seem to follow some standard, given that descriptions seem to be shortenings for wider expressions¹⁸.

A possible conclusion might be that any definite description should be accepted *by default*, as if it were literally correct, but with the implicit acknowledgment that we may always find some possible situation in which the description fails to be literally correct, and needs reformulation (unless it is rejected). We need therefore to use a generalized 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. If pointing with a finger is considered not polite, we may use other indexicals; if they are not enough (or are considered themselves not polite), we may use definite descriptions. The context shows whether the use of the description is referential or attributive, that is whether we use descriptions (i) to refer to somebody when we lack or don't want to use other directly referential means, or (ii) to look for somebody we have not yet individuated.

Truth is fixed only in context; everything we say is a mixture of different features which need effort to be extracted to be judged as true or false. But we have the power to charitably take for true the most relevant aspects of the conversation, leaving a piteous veil on the aspects of falsity when they are not actually relevant for the goals of the conversation. With the proviso to keep in sight the need to reveal the other side of the truth when needed. 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* assertions in conversation; things could *always* be different (the man in the scene might have been the husband in disguise).

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¹⁸ A suggestion comes also from the "implicit" interpretation of incomplete description, only partly contrasting with the elliptical interpretation (On the contrast between implicit vs explicit or elliptical see Neale 2004, §7 and §18). In the implicit interpretation "the x Fx" becomes "the x Fx & x ∈ r". Here we might rephrase "r" using elements of the cognitive context of a (possible) audience. From my point of view, the concept of cognitive context as a formal tool may take useful contributions from the formal setting of multi-context and multi-agent theories developed in Artificial Intelligence. But this is another part of the story I don't want to get in here.

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