The Ambiguity Thesis vs. Kripke's Defence of Russell: Further Developments[*]

Kripke (1977) presents an argument designed to show that the considerations in Donnellan (1966) concerning *attributive* and *referential* uses of (definite) descriptions do not, by themselves, refute Russell's (1905) unitary theory of description sentences (RTD), which takes (utterances of) them to express purely general, quantificational, propositions. Against Kripke, Marga Reimer (1998) argues that the two uses do indeed reflect a semantic ambiguity (an ambiguity at the level of literal truth conditions). She maintains a Russellian (quantificational) analysis of utterances involving attributively used descriptions but attempts to defend the following two claims about utterances involving referentially used descriptions (*referential utterances*) (1998, p. 89):

(1) The *frequency* of the referential use of descriptions, the fact that such use is quite *standard* (statistically common), does pose a threat to Russell's analysis that is not averted by Kripke's argument.

(2) Such frequency, when coupled with certain other considerations, is semantically, i.e. truth-conditionally, significant.

These claims have already been defended (Ramachandran 1996). However, Reimer's defence has novel elements we wish to comment on: (i) an analysis of referential utterances that respects claim (2), (ii) an argument in support of that analysis, and (iii) an interesting *reductio* of a strenghtened version of the Kripkean line of defence. We shall provide a counterexample to the analysis and an independent reason for rejecting the argument in its favour. The reductio, we shall argue, may be thwarted by a refined version of Kripke's reasoning and is, in any case, unnecessary. We should make clear our goal here is not merely to undermine Reimer's case—we believe there are important methodological lessons to be learnt.

1. Reimer's analysis.

Reimer's account of referential utterances is specified in the following passage:

> a referential utterance of the form *The F is G* expresses a singular proposition [of the form *x is G*, where *x* is (or stands for) the intended referent] provided the intended referent satisfies the linguistic meaning (the 'sense') of the definite description: provided

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> it is the (contextually) unique *F*. In cases where this condition is *not* met, a singular proposition may well be *communicated*, but no proposition (singular or general) will be *literally expressed*. (1998, p. 93)

One point mentioned as a selling point of this analysis is that:

> [it] precludes the counterintuitive result (of Donnellan's analysis) that one might utter a sentence of the form *The F is G* and say something that is literally true even if the (contextually) unique *F* is not *G* (1998, p. 94).

Here is the sort of example Reimer presumably has in mind. Jones is wrongly suspected of murdering Smith; *A* utters *Smith's murderer is insane*, using *Smith's murderer* referentially, to communicate a propostion about *Jones*, to the effect that *he [Jones] is insane*. As it happens, Jones is insane; but, the person who really murdered Smith, Patel, is not. Now, according to Donnellan's analysis—at any rate, the analysis attributed to him—*A* has said something literally true, even though Smith's murderer—'the (contextually) unique murderer of Smith', Patel—is not insane. Reimer's account avoids this result precisely because the intended referent, Jones, is not Smith's murderer; this dictates that *no* proposition is literally expressed by *A*'s utterance; so, trivially, *A* has said nothing that is literally true.

We share Reimer's intuition that *A* has not said something literally true in the above example. But, *contra* her analysis, the intuition that *A has* said something that is literally *false* is equally forceful. Or just vary the above example slightly: suppose Patel is insane whereas Jones is not; surely *A has* said something *literally true* in this case; yet Reimer's account still dictates that *A* has not *said* anything. So, her account does not strike us as having a marked advantage over Donnellan's: for one might still utter a sentence of the form *The F is G* and fail to say something that is literally true even if the (contextually) unique *F is G*.

In response, Reimer may play down our intuitions about *literal* content here and offer a *pragmatic* explanation of our intuition about the truth value. *A* fails to *say* anything, the explanation runs, but she does *communicate* a purely general proposition, roughly: *that there is exactly one murderer of Smith and whoever murdered Smith is insane*. The intuition that *A* has said something true (in the last example) stems from the truth of this *communicated* proposition.

But there are two problems with this response. The first arises from the fact that *A*'s utterance is, by hypothesis, a referential utterance, i.e. she has communicated a singular proposition (one which happens to be false in the present example). So, a defender of the above response must maintain that (at least) two propositions are communicated by *A*: a true quantificational proposition and a false

singular proposition. The suggested explanation is therefore incomplete. For, we clearly are not torn between two opposing views: that *A*'s utterance is literally true and that it is literally false; we have the first view, period. To complete the explanation, then, one would need to say why the first view wins out.

The second problem is that it conflicts with a central line of argument in Reimer's paper, to which we now turn.

2. When communicated propositions are (also) literally expressed propositions.

Anticipating the Kripkean point that the singular propositions conveyed by referential utterances may be regarded merely as pragmatically imparted propositions rather than literally expressed propositions, Reimer (1998, p. 94 ff.) puts forward the following four conditions as being (jointly) *sufficient* for the correctness of her account—as an account of the *literal content* of referential utterances:

(i) The analysis is *coherent*; it *could* (in theory) be true of English.
(ii) The referential use of descriptions is a *standard* use.
(iii) Referential utterances do *communicate* the (sorts of) propositions the analysis takes them to literally express.
(iv) What the analysis takes a referential utterance, *The F is G*, to literally express is constrained by the *linguistic meanings* of the expressions comprising the utterance. [For, according to the analysis, the linguistic meaning of *the F* contributes *indirectly* to the content of the utterance in that the semantic referent of *the F* must be (contextually) unique with respect to *F*-hood.]

We won't dispute that these conditions are met. What we query is whether this really is sufficient for the correctness of her account. For, if, as was just floated at the end of §1, one maintains that Russellian quantificational propositions (henceforth, RQ-propositions) are communicated even by referential utterances, then the above line of reasoning would appear to recommend a Russellian analysis of referential utterances as well! Briefly: (i) a Russellian treatment is at least coherent (so maintain the many defenders of a unitary Russellian account); (ii) the referential use is standard (this is undisputed); (iii) referential utterances do, on the present hypothesis, communicate the sorts of propositions the analysis takes them to literally express; and (iv) what the Russellian analysis takes a referential utterance, *The F is G*, to literally express *is* appropriately constrained by the corresponding linguistic meanings: according to the Russellian, the linguistic meaning of *the F* contributes *directly* to the content of the utterance (uniqueness with respect to *F*-hood is *explictly affirmed in the literal content*)—see Reimer's

remarks on the attributive use (1998, p. 93). So, as we say, a unitary Russellian analysis, opposed by Reimer, also comes out as being correct by her line of reasoning.

One might attempt blocking this objection by maintaining that referential utterances convey *only* the object-dependent proposition, and not the quantificational one—this would be to deny that condition (iii) is met by the Russellian account. But why should only one, or one kind of, proposition be communicated? Consider the example from §1 where *A* utters *Smith's murderer is insane* using *Smith's murderer* referentially to pick out *Jones*. It strikes us that a number of propositions are conveyed by the utterance: e.g. that Jones murdered Smith, that Jones's behaviour is odd, that Jones is insane. Now, the first and third of the mentioned propositions entail the general proposition that *one person murdered Smith and this person is insane*, which is the very proposition Russellians take the utterance to express. Some further argument is required for the conclusion that the (allegedly) expressed proposition is not also one of the communicated propositions.

Of course, Reimer cannot resort to the view that expressed propositions are never conveyed propositions, because her thesis is precisely that the (object-dependent) propositions she takes to be communicated by referential utterances are what the utterances literally express. What she needs to argue, rather, is that these propositions are conveyed in a special sense that the other sorts of propositions we have mentioned in the previous example are not conveyed. It is an open question whether she can achieve this in a non question-begging way.

In the meantime, Reimer is caught in a dilemma. If she denies that RQ-propositions are conveyed by referential utterances, then she robs herself of the explanation we floated at the end of §1 for our inclination to count a referential utterance, "The F is G", as *true* in cases where the intended F is *not* G but some G is uniquely F (i.e. where the RQ-proposition is true). If, on the other hand, she concedes that RQ-propositions *are* conveyed by referential utterances, she lays herself open to the charge we made in this section, namely, that the line of reasoning she offers in support of her analysis may be used to support Russell's rival analysis too.

3. Standard use and dead metaphors

Reimer also presents an argument directed against a potential strengthening of Kripke's defensive strategy. Kripke's original argument exemplifies the following methodological principle:

> **Kripke's Principle**
> If someone alleges that a certain linguistic phenomenon in English is a counterexample to a given analysis, consider a hypothetical language which

> (as much as possible) is like English, except that the analysis is *stipulated* to be correct. Imagine such a hypothetical language being introduced into a community and spoken by it. *If the phenomenon in question would still arise in a community which spoke such a hypothetical language (which may not be English), then the fact that it arises in English cannot disprove the hypothesis that the analysis is correct for English.* (Kripke 1977, p. 16, his emphases)

Take the phenomenon in question to be the occurrence of referential uses of descriptions, the analysis under threat to be Russell's theory, and call the corresponding hypothetical language *Russell-English*. Kripke reasons that since the phenomenon would indeed arise amongst Russell-English speakers—(after all, even *explict quantifier-expressions* are used referentially by English speakers in the actual world)—the fact that the phenomenon actually arises amongst English speakers does not refute the Russellian analysis, as an analysis of actual utterances of English description sentences.

Reimer claims that this line of argument does not go through if we take the relevant phenomenon to be the fact that the referential use of descriptions (constrained by the linguistic meanings of the uttered description sentences) is *standard*. The referential use of explicit quantifier-expressions amongst speakers of English, for example, certainly is not *standard*. So why should Russell-English speakers standardly (as opposed to merely occasionally) use descriptions referentially when in their language descriptions are uncontroversial quantifier-expressions? We share Reimer's intuition that they wouldn't, and that this thereby blocks the Kripkean argument. (The point is not new though: it is made in Ramachandran 1996.)

At this juncture, however, Reimer puts forward a potential Russellian rejoinder:

> **Potential Russellian rejoinder**
> [...] there is no difficulty in the supposition that a certain type of expression might have a *standard* (linguistically constrained) use as a referring expression, despite functioning invariably in accordance with Russell's Theory of Descriptions. (Reimer 1998, p. 97)

We may put this suggestion in Kripkean terms: because the referential use of descriptions *could be* standard—(notice the '*might have*' in the above passage)—amongst *Russell-English* speakers, then the fact that it *is* standard amongst *English* speakers does not disprove the hypothesis that RTD is correct for English.

Basically, this strategy replaces the '*would still arise*' in Kripke's Principle with '*could still arise*'.[1]

Reimer attempts to refute this proposal by presenting an analogous line of reasoning which yields the controversial, if not absurd, conclusion that there are no 'dead' metaphors in English. She considers the verb 'incense'. Originally, let us suppose, 'incense' had just one literal meaning: *to make fragrant with incense*. At some stage it began to be used metaphorically to mean: *to make very angry*. But now the metaphor is dead: "due to frequent use, its former metaphorical meaning has become one of its (two) literal meanings" (Reimer 1998, p. 97). This seems an entirely reasonable view. Yet, as Reimer argues, it is refuted by way of the revised Kripkean principle as follows. First, the new principle yields that the original literal meaning of 'incense' is still its *only* literal meaning:

> Imagine a language, **L**, as similar to English as possible but where, *by stipulation*, the verb remains unambiguous and means *to make fragrant with incense*. **L**-speakers might still *standardly* use the word as if it meant: *to make very angry*—for, actual *English*-speakers so used the word in the past when it literally meant what it still literally means in **L**. So, the fact that this use of the word is standard in English does not disprove the view that 'incense' still literally (and unambiguously) means *to make fragrant with incense*.

Secondly, this line of reasoning would apply to *any* word we took to have a literal, 'dead metaphor' meaning (as it were). Finally, if we apply a linguistic version of Occam's Razor principle—roughly: not to multiply *literal meanings* beyond necessity—we end up with the conclusion that there are *no* dead metaphors in English. That such a controversial thesis is so easily established by Kripkean reasoning does, we agree, cast doubt on the soundness of that reasoning.

However, Russellians may have a way out of this predicament. We noted in §2 that a Russellian could maintain that RQ-propositions are conveyed by referential utterances, and that Reimer herself may be forced to maintain this in order to avoid our objection to her analysis in §1. The Russellian can then maintain that the object-dependent propositions conveyed by referential utterances are conveyed *by way* of the conveyed RQ-propositions. Thus, in our working example, *A*'s utterance of *Smith's murderer is insane* conveys the object-dependent proposition that *Jones is insane*, on this suggestion, *by way of* conveying the RQ-proposition that *one person murdered Smith and that person is insane*. The idea is that the conveyed RQ-proposition, the context of utterance, and Gricean pragmatic principles jointly yield the object-dependent proposition. (We do not endorse this proposal—we present it merely to show how Reimer's strategy can be

[1] This tack is floated, and questioned, in Ramachandran (1995).

undermined.) Now, by contrast, in the case of the (formerly) metaphorical use of the verb 'incense', the metaphorical content is *not* conveyed by an utterance by virtue of the utterance also conveying the non-metaphorical content. To be sure, what is conveyed by a particular utterance, *u*, involving the metaphorical use of 'incense' does depend on the non-metaphorical meaning of the word-*type* 'incense'—or, if you prefer, on the meaning of *non-metaphorical tokenings* of the word-type—*but u*'s conveyed metaphorical content does not depend on *u* itself conveying a different, non-metaphorical content.

This difference between the two cases suggests a simple repair to the Russellian strategy.

> **Modified Kripkean Principle**
> If sentences of type *S* are standardly used by speakers of English to convey propositions of type *P*, and this is alleged to refute a semantic analysis, *T*, that takes *S*-type sentences to literally express propositions of type *Q*, not of type *P*, consider the following question. Is it feasible to maintain that such utterances also convey *Q*-type propositions and that it is in virtue of their doing so that they convey the *P*-type propositions? If the answer is *Yes*, then semantic analysis *T* is not in fact refuted.

Although this repair is explicitly designed to circumvent the dead-metaphor argument, it seems a reasonable improvement on Kripke's original proposal, not merely *ad hoc*. So, we contend that Reimer's argument does not see off the Kripkean challenge she envisages.

The question arises: What, if anything, is wrong with the modified Kripkean principle? Or does it successfully fend off the alleged threat to RTD from the standard referential use of descriptions? The answer to the latter question is *No*. To see what's wrong with the principle, let us reconsider the potential Russellian rejoinder Reimer is worried about—in short: that it is still *consistent* with the correctness of RTD that descriptions are standardly used referentially. We accept that RTD does not *entail* that descriptions are not standardly used referentially; to that extent we accept the consistency-claim. But this is hardly significant: RTD is an analysis of *meaning*, not of *use*—so, obviously, it will not, *by itself*, logically entail any pattern of use. Such consistency, considered by itself, is therefore of little *semantic* significance. The same goes for Kripke's original principle if the '*would still arise*' is read as '*could still arise*'. The Russellian rejoinder has little semantic-bite because it is a mystery—by which we mean there is no obvious explanation in the offing—as to *why* the referential use of descriptions could be standard even though RTD is correct. In Kripkean terms, it is a mystery as to *why* referential utterances could turn out to be standard amongst *Russell-English* speakers. By contrast, Kripke's original defence of RTD in the face of the *mere*

existence of referential utterances works precisely because it is *not* a mystery why referential utterances occur *now and then*, especially seeing as uncontroversial quantifier expressions are used referentially on occasion too.

As things stand, the ambiguity theory offers a transparent explanation of why referential uses are *standard—viz*. because they are literal uses!—whereas there is no obvious or proferred explanation of this fact on the assumption that RTD is correct. Clearly, this difference between the two accounts tells in favour of the ambiguity theory over RTD.

We conclude with a disclaimer. In §1 we disputed Reimer's analysis of referential utterances but we did not propose an alternative account that complied with the ambiguity thesis. The fact is, *neither of us accepts the ambiguity thesis, and we disagree about which sort of unitary account is correct*! One of us believes some version of RTD can still be defended while the other favours an account which treats descriptions as referring expressions. So our goal in this paper has *not* been to defend the ambiguity thesis *per se* but to clear up some confusions concerning, and explicate the real impact of, methodological considerations floated in Reimer (1998) and Kripke (1977). These methodological lessons should, we trust, inform attempts to provide a positive analysis of descriptions.[2]

References

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[2] Thanks to Kent Bach for comments on earlier versions of §§1 and 2.