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SPEAKER'S REFERENT AND SEMANTIC REFERENT IN INTERPRETIVE INTERACTION

SUMMARY: In this paper I argue that the notions of speaker's reference and semantic reference—used by Kripke in order to counter the contentious consequences of Donnellan's distinction between the referential use and the attributive use of definite descriptions—do not have any application in the interpretive interaction between speaker and hearer. Hearers are always concerned with speaker's reference. Either, in cases of cooperation, as presented as such by the speaker or, in cases of conflict, as perceived as such by the hearer. Any claim as to semantic reference is irrelevant for the purposes of communication and conversation. To the extent that the purpose of semantic theory is to account for linguistic communication, there is no reason to take definite descriptions to have semantic reference.

KEY WORDS: definite descriptions, speaker's referent, semantic referent, semantics/pragmatics, conversational interaction, interpretation.

Introduction

There are two controversial things suggested by Donnellan in his paper *Reference and Definite Descriptions*. First, the claim that the distinction between the referential and the attributive uses of definite descriptions amounts to a semantic distinction. Second, the claim that a speaker may succeed in saying something true despite using a definite description which does not apply to the referent she had in mind. These claims are counter to Russell's influential analysis. For Russell, the surface form of sentences containing definite descriptions should not

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mislead us into thinking that they are about particular objects. A statement of the form “The *F* is *G*” amounts, at the logical level, to a general existential statement of the form “There is one and only one entity which is *F* and that entity is *G*”. Semantically, sentences containing definite descriptions are not referential at all. In case there is no entity which corresponds to the description “the *F*”, the sentence is simply false (Russell, 1905). Strawson, in reaction to Russell’s account, certainly takes sentences containing definite descriptions to be genuinely referring. However, his official position regarding faulty descriptions is that in case there is no entity which corresponds to the description, the sentence lacks a truth value, that there is such an entity being a presupposition of the sentence (Strawson, 1950).

Donnellan invites us first to imagine that the speaker is at the site of Smith’s murder. The circumstances of the scene lead to her to the belief that the person who murdered Smith, of whom nothing further is known, is insane. Second, we are invited to imagine that a certain person called Jones is accused of the murder of Smith and that the speaker is at Jones’s trial. Jones’s behaviour in court leads her to the belief that Jones is insane. Would not the speaker’s utterance of the sentence “Smith’s murderer is insane” in these two imagined cases make two distinct claims? In the first case, the speaker would not be concerned with any particular person; she would be concerned with whomever murdered Smith. In the second case, the speaker would be concerned with a particular person, namely Jones, and her claim would be about him, whether or not he actually murdered Smith. In the latter case, the speaker uses the description “Smith’s murderer” only as a device to pick out the particular person she has in mind, namely Jones, and about whom she wants to say something, namely that he is insane. In the former case, the speaker uses the definite description to say something about the person, whoever she or he is, who murdered Smith, namely that she or he is insane, to judge from the details of the crime scene.

These are thus the intuitions which motivate Donnellan’s distinction between the referential use (the latter case) and the attributive use (the former case) of definite descriptions. This distinction does not only contradict Russell’s unitary semantic account of definite descriptions, but adds also to Strawson’s criticism of Russell. Donnellan insists that, precisely because the speaker uses the description to refer to some object that she has in mind, she may very well succeed in saying something true, even though the description does not apply to the object. So, it seems that, for Donnellan, sentences containing definite descriptions which do not properly apply to their intended referents are neither false (Russell) nor lacking a truth value (Strawson), but may actually be true.

In his paper *Speaker’s Reference and Semantic Reference*, Kripke contends that Donnellan does not present any conclusive argument against Russell’s semantic analysis of definite descriptions. Donnellan’s referential use should be conceived of as a thoroughly pragmatic phenomenon. The semantic referent and the speaker’s referent of a definite description should be firmly distinguished. In this paper, I shall argue that speakers and hearers engaged in conversation and

communication are not concerned with any such thing as the semantic reference of definite descriptions. Hearers are solely concerned with speaker's reference. Either, in cases of cooperation, as presented as such by the speaker or, in cases of conflict, as perceived as such by the hearer. Any claim as to semantic reference is irrelevant for the purposes of communication and conversation. First, I shall review Kripke's arguments for semantic reference. Second, I shall look at Kripke's so-called complex cases from the viewpoint of the interpretive interaction of speakers and hearers. I shall also have a brief look at some more recent approaches to the referential/attributive distinction where there is an unnecessary concern with semantic reference too. I shall conclude that to the extent that the purpose of semantic theory is to account for linguistic communication there is no reason to take definite descriptions to have semantic reference.

Part I

One influential way of restoring Russell's analysis of definite descriptions is due to Kripke. In his paper *Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference*, Kripke counters Donnellan's referential/attributive distinction by distinguishing between simple and complex cases of uses of definite descriptions. In the simple case, which corresponds to Donnellan's attributive use, the speaker has the intention to refer to the unique satisfier of the description. In the complex case, which corresponds to Donnellan's referential use, the speaker has the intention to refer to a particular object in her mind. This object may or may not be the object, if any, which satisfies the description she uses. Thus, the speaker's referent—the object the speaker has a referential intention about—may or may not coincide with the semantic referent of a given definite description, i.e. the unique satisfier of the definite description. This distinction has the virtue of applying not only to definite descriptions, but also to proper names. Speakers regularly utter definite descriptions, as well as proper names, while having particular objects in mind to which they want to refer. These particular objects need not fit, nor have, the definite descriptions, or names, which speakers use. That speakers often succeed in making themselves understood in accordance with their intentions is, however, a matter of pragmatics. There is no reason to refute Russell's account from a semantic point of view.

The simple/complex distinction is supported by a distinction between what words mean, what words mean on a given occasion, and what speakers mean. This distinction is intuitive and plausible. A sentence seldom means all that the speaker wants to convey by uttering it. Kripke says:

The notion of what words can mean, in the language, is semantical: it is given by the conventions of our language. What they mean, on a given occasion, is determined, on a given occasion, by these conventions, together with the intentions of the speaker and various contextual features. Finally what the speaker meant, on a given occasion, in saying certain words, derives from various further special in-

tentions of the speaker, together with various general principles, applicable to all human languages regardless of their special conventions. (Kripke, 1977, p. 263)

The first level is the inherent meaning of lexical items and syntactical constructions. It is the meaning which items and constructions carry with them to each individual occasion of use. This meaning is a matter of conventions and past use. It is created by speakers collectively and therefore unaffected by the habits, idiosyncrasies and occasional intentions of individual speakers. Each item or construction has, as it were, a certain meaning potential: it can mean this or that. On an occasion of use the question is not, however, what a sentence can mean according to the conventions of the language. The question is what it means here and now, what contribution it makes to the communicative purposes at hand. This is the second level distinguished by Kripke. He says that the meaning at this level is determined by three factors: convention, intention and context. Which reasons are there to distinguish between what a sentence can mean and what it does mean on a given occasion of use? Apart from ambiguity, the most conspicuous reason is perhaps to do with indexicality. The function of some terms is not to contribute their inherent standing meaning, but to pick out particular objects or values at their occasions of use. Their conventional or linguistic meaning provides us with general rules as to how to determine their occasional reference. These terms thus mean one thing according to the conventions of the language and another thing according to their contexts of use (cf. Kaplan's [1977] distinction between character and content). The third level is about what speakers mean when using sentences. It is clear that speakers may mean more than can be read off from their words, even if these are complemented by intention and context. Much additional meaning which hearers perceive utterances to have is not to be tied to the words of the sentence but to general considerations about the speaker's intentions. These are what Kripke calls special intentions.

Kripke's own example will illustrate these levels. One burglar says to another: "The cops are inside the bank". The word "bank", according to the conventions of the language, can mean commercial bank as well as river bank. This is relevant to the first level above. What does the word mean on this occasion of use? This is the second level. It is determined by convention (either commercial or river bank) together with context and intention. In this case, the word "bank" is used to mean "commercial bank", whether this is conceived of as determined by context or intention. Moreover, the burglar in uttering this sentence might well have a further purpose. For instance, by uttering the sentence he might want to propose to the other burglar to split. But "this is no part of the meaning of his words" (Kripke, 1977, p. 263). In this case, it is by knowing first the meaning of the speaker's words that the hearer can understand the speaker's further purpose in uttering them.

Kripke suggests that it is the last level which is relevant in order to address the referential/attributive distinction. According to the conventional meaning of a sentence containing a definite description, it means "There is a unique object such that it is *F* and *G*". The occasional meaning of such a sentence includes as

its semantic referent whatever object happens to fit the description. But, of course, a speaker may use a definite description in order to refer to the particular object which she wants to talk about. This object may not even satisfy the description. Kripke suggests that the speaker's referent belongs to the speaker's meaning and is no part of the meaning of the speaker's words, no more than the burglar's proposal to split is part of the meaning of "The cops are inside the bank".

The simple/complex distinction is also supported by another general distinction, namely the distinction between a speaker's general and specific intentions.

In a given idiolect, the semantic referent of a designator (without indexicals) is given by a general intention of the speaker to refer to a certain object whenever the designator is used. The speaker's referent is given by a specific intention, on a given occasion, to refer to a certain object. If the speaker believes that the object he wants to talk about, on a given occasion, fulfills the conditions for being the semantic referent, then he believes that there is no clash between his general intentions and his specific intentions. (Kripke, 1977, p. 264)

This distinction is also very plausible. Certainly a speaker has, with regard to the designators of her language, general intentions such that she uses this designator to refer to that object and that designator to refer to this object. Certainly she also has, whenever she is about to use one of her designators in order to talk about a particular object, the specific intention to refer to the particular object she wants to talk about. In most cases, she will use the designator which according to her general intentions refers to the particular object she has the specific intention to refer to. But, naturally, it may happen, for various reasons, that she uses a designator which according to her general intentions refers to an object different from the one she now wants to talk about. If so, there will be a clash between her different kinds of intentions.

The distinctions of levels of meaning and of intentions which Kripke identifies are intuitive and plausible. The account of simple and complex cases presents us with a picture as to how Donnellan's intuitions can be handled while preserving Russell's analysis of definite descriptions. They seemingly permit us to relegate the referential/attributive distinction to the realm of pragmatics. There are indeed good arguments for the view that there is no reason to count the referential/attributive distinction as anything but pragmatic. However, these arguments do not by themselves establish that there is any reason to take definite descriptions to have semantic reference.

Kripke and many other theorists take it as a matter of course that definite descriptions have semantic meaning or reference. The reason is probably that the semantic reference of definite descriptions appears to be due to certain matters of fact. First, there are certain facts of linguistic meaning. To use the classic example which we will soon come back to, the definite description "the man drinking martini" does as a matter of fact mean the man drinking martini, in the sense that the community of English speakers regularly use these words in such a way that they have acquired the meanings they have, and syntax or rules of composition

tell us the certain meaning the whole phrase has. Second, to whom this description applies in the context is also a factual matter. For of the people present at the party at which the sentence is uttered it is either true or false that they are the man drinking martini. Linguistic meaning and factual circumstances are both independent of the speaker's referential intention. It seems then that a definite description comes to acquire its referent in a way similar to the way pure indexicals often are thought to acquire their semantic values. "I", "now" and "here" pick out persons (speakers), times and places by virtue of meaning and circumstances. This speaks in favour of taking the reference of definite descriptions to be factually determined. The facts of meaning and of circumstances are certainly indubitable. Given the propositional content of a sentence, its truth value is a factual matter. The question here, however, is what should be taken as the content of the sentence. This is possibly not a factual matter. Perhaps definite descriptions, when used by speakers to refer to objects which they have in mind, do not have anything but speaker reference. This is what I shall attempt to show by considering the use of definite descriptions in interpretive interaction.

Part II

The Primacy of Speaker Intentions

Let us now take a look at the referential/attributive distinction from the point of view of speakers and hearers engaged in communication. Confronted with a speaker's utterance of a sentence containing a definite description, the hearer will hardly be concerned with the linguistic meaning of the sentence as such. The hearer's concern is not with what the sentence means according to the conventions of language, lexical content and syntactical rules. The hearer's concern is with what the sentence means here and now. The occasional meaning of the sentence which the hearer is concerned with seemingly corresponds to the second of the levels which Kripke distinguished. How does the hearer conceive of this occasional meaning? Does it appear to her as the conventional meaning of the sentence which is to be determined and complemented by the speaker's intention and the context of the utterance, as Kripke suggests? Rather, the hearer takes a direct interest in what the speaker wants to convey. Her goal is to know what contribution the speaker is making to the ongoing conversation, and the communicative purposes that the speaker and the hearer are involved in. For the hearer, the occasional meaning of the sentence is the speaker's intended meaning. The speaker's intention is, as such, inaccessible to her. The hearer uses what she knows about the conventional meaning of the sentence and about the context in order to come up with a hypothesis about the speaker's intention.

This interpretive procedure does not imply the unimportance of linguistic meaning. Linguistic meaning is in most cases the principal clue to the speaker's intended meaning. But it does imply that the hearer does not proceed at determining the meaning of the sentence independently of coming up with an hypoth-

esis concerning the speaker's intended meaning. For the hearer to know that definite descriptions may be used to state things about whatever satisfies the description, and also to state things about a certain object the speaker has in mind, is certainly important in order to come up with a hypothesis regarding the speaker's intended meaning. But for this purpose it is completely unnecessary to determine whether the semantic meaning of definite descriptions is attributive or referential. The sentence is not truth evaluated in abstraction from the speaker's intention. The hearer's question is not whether the sentence expresses something true in the context at hand, but whether the speaker expresses something true. In the case of definite descriptions it is not incumbent on the hearer first to tell what is said and then reason from what is said to the speaker's meaning.

This is true also of Kripke's distinction between general and specific intentions. The hearer may be convinced that the speaker has general intentions concerning the designators in her language. These intentions will not however interest her as such. The hearer's interest is oriented towards the speaker's specific intention, i.e. what the speaker wants to refer to by her use of the designator here and now. Her interest in the speaker's general intention is only to the extent that it contributes to the satisfaction of her interest in the specific intention.

Similar remarks apply to some more recent theorists' referential approach to definite descriptions. Devitt takes the fact that definite descriptions are regularly used as referring devices to speak in favour of their referentiality's being a feature of their conventional meaning. Definite descriptions are thus to be regarded as ambiguous: the semantic meaning of definite descriptions is attributive as well as referential (Devitt, 2007). Jaszczolt goes a step further. Even if definite descriptions at the linguistic level can be used quantificationally as well as referentially, they are most often used referentially. The referential reading is thus not only conventional, but actually default (cf. also Capone, 2011). Jaszczolt uses the following example:

The best architect designed this church (Jaszczolt, 2005, p. 106).

She comments:

[I]n [this sentence], “the best architect” normally refers to a particular, known, identifiable individual. In the context of conversation, such as, for example, when the interlocutors are looking at the Sagrada Família in Barcelona, this salient reading is the one where the description refers to Antoni Gaudí. (Jaszczolt, 2005, p. 106)

It is perhaps the case that “the best architect” normally is referential. Nevertheless, for the hearer engaged in communication with the speaker, what meaning is default and what meaning is semantic is of limited concern. The hearer's question is what the speaker uses it for here and now. To know what the default interpretation of definite descriptions is does not answer the question of what the speaker uses the definite description to say on a particular occasion. To know that the literal meaning of definite descriptions is attributive as well as referential

does not help the hearer in knowing what the speaker means by her use of a given definite description. It is certainly important for hearers to know that definite descriptions are used by speakers, both to make general existential statements and singular statements, but whether the latter kind of use is semantic or pragmatic is not important. It might also be helpful for hearers to know that definite descriptions most frequently are used to make singular statements. That piece of knowledge might be useful when coming up with an hypothesis about the speaker's intention. To go from the empirical observation that definite descriptions regularly or even most frequently are used as referential devices to the theoretical claim that the referential reading is default could certainly be important, but should not eclipse the fact that this has no regulatory role to play in the interpretive interaction of speakers and hearers.

In sum, the hearer does not have to determine what is literally or semantically said by a sentence containing a definite description in order to make an hypothesis about what object the speaker wants to refer to. In other words, it is not necessary to determine the semantic referent of a definite description in order come up with a hypothesis about the speaker's referent. It is not at all necessary to let the linguistic meaning of the sentence give rise to a semantically expressed referent in order to calculate the speaker's referent. For the hearer, the question as to whether definite descriptions at the semantic level express general or singular propositions and, if singular, whether the attributive or referential are uninteresting for the hearer engaged in understanding what the speaker means. Linguistic meaning serves as no more than an important clue as to what the speaker means here and now. The hearer's interest in the conventional meaning of the sentence is no more than instrumental.

Complex Cases

So far I have insisted that hearers take a direct interest in the speaker's intended meaning. In those cases which Kripke describes as simple cases, this interpretive attitude will not have any distinctive consequences. For in those cases there is no difference between what the words mean on this occasion and what the speaker wants to mean by them. We must therefore consider what Kripke describes as complex cases.

In complex cases, there is a clash between the speaker's general and specific intentions. The speaker has the specific intention to refer to Jones, who is not drinking martini. Due to faulty knowledge, however, she uses the definite description "the man drinking martini" concerning which she has the general intention that it refers to unique martini drinkers. What if the speaker uses a definite description to refer to a person which does not satisfy the description? How does such a clash appear to the hearer? Let us take Sainsbury's depiction of the scenario as the background of our discussion:

Donnellan [...] argued that we could recognize a referential use of a definite description “the *F*” by the fact that the speaker could thereby refer to something which is not *F*. If one takes this line, one will be tempted to count an utterance of “The man drinking martini is drunk” as true if Jones is drunk and is the object of the speaker’s referential intentions, even if Jones has nothing but water in his martini glass. This ruling is not compulsory. In such a case, assuming the circumstances to be of the most ordinary kind, the speaker intended to refer to a martini-drinker but failed. We are not compelled to say that this failure really amounts to success in referring to a non-martini-drinker. [...] Suppose (as before) that Jones is the object of the speaker’s intentions and that there is also a unique martini drinker, Smith. One could not fault a hearer who took the utterance to be true just if Smith is drunk. If this is a faultless interpretation, it must have correctly identified what the speaker said. (Sainsbury, 2006, p. 415)

The speaker wants to say about a certain person whom she knows under the name of Jones that he is drunk. She thinks that the hearer does not know that the person whom she wants to talk about is called Jones. Therefore the speaker has recourse to a description of Jones which she thinks will help the hearer to identify the person she wants to talk about. Luckily, Jones, unlike the other guests, as far as the speaker knows, has a martini glass in his hand. So the speaker thinks that the utterance of the sentence “The man drinking martini is drunk” will do the job. However, the hearer is better informed about the real distribution of glasses and liquids among the guests. She knows that there are two martini glasses around. One is filled with martini and is in the hands of a certain person called Smith. The other martini glass is filled with water and is handled by a person which is otherwise unknown to the hearer. This is the person whom the speaker knows as Jones and wants to talk about. In such a scenario it is clear that the definite description “the man drinking martini” properly applies to Smith and not to Jones, as the speaker falsely believes.

When describing the scenario, Sainsbury uses notions such as “counting as true”, “failure”, “success” and “correct identification of what is said”. How will the hearer handle this scenario and what notions will she have recourse to? There are several possibilities which we will consider in turn.

Jones as Referent

Let us first imagine a scenario where the hearer directly takes the referent to be Jones. The hearer certainly thinks that the description “the man drinking martini” applies to Smith. However, the hearer is also presented with simultaneous additional evidence as to the speaker’s intended referent. These factors speak against the speaker’s wanting to refer to Smith. For instance, Smith is not in the vicinity and the speaker gestures in the direction of the person holding a martini glass with water in his hand. The overall evidence suggests to the hearer that the speaker wants to talk about Jones. So she takes the predication of drunkenness to regard this person.

Did the speaker in such a case fail or succeed to refer to Jones? Did the hearer correctly identify what the speaker said? Will the hearer make the distinction between the meaning of the speaker's words on this occasion and what the speaker meant? I doubt that the hearer will put things in these terms. In case her hypothesis that the speaker wanted to talk about the water-drinking person is not contradicted by their future conversation, the hearer will probably think that she managed to guess at the speaker's intended referent, even though the linguistic means used by the speaker were not adequate. The hearer may be perfectly aware that the words of the speaker, understood along conventional lines, indicate a different referent. But the hearer will hardly be concerned with determining the meaning of the speaker's words on this occasion. That would be irrelevant to her purpose. The natural interest of the hearer is in the speaker's intention. Therefore, her whole effort will be directed at the speaker's referent. In order to arrive at the speaker's referent, it is not necessary to establish the semantic referent or unique satisfier of the definite description. The hearer takes an interest in what the speaker's words, according to the conventions of language and various contextual factors could mean on the occasion in question, because that serves her ultimate purpose, which is to know what the speaker means by those words. But it would be very peculiar for the hearer to proceed in determining what the speaker's words do mean, as a matter of semantical fact somehow composed of convention, intention and context. For, what purpose would that serve? The semantic referent, i.e. the object satisfying the definite description, is of no concern for the hearer taking an interest in the speaker's referent.

This interpretive attitude is considered by Strawson, as Donnellan points out in an interesting footnote. In a reply to Sellars, Strawson says that in some cases "if forced to choose between calling what was said true or false, we shall be more inclined to say that it was true" (Strawson, 1954, p. 227).

Strawson continues by means of an example:

if I say, "The United States Chamber of Deputies contains representatives of two major parties", I shall be allowed to have said something true even though I have used the wrong title, a title, in fact, which applies to nothing. (Strawson, 1954, p. 227)

In this case the speaker is misdescribing the United States Congress. Strawson proposes to deal with cases like this by the notion of an amended statement. The hearer understands that the speaker by her use of the misnaming description "the United States Chamber of Deputies" wants to refer to the United States Congress. The hearer amends the speaker's original statement accordingly. It is the amended statement which is assessed for truth or falsity; the original statement is left aside: "we are not awarding a truth-value at all to the original statement" (Strawson, 1954, p. 227).

Donnellan presents two objections to the notion of amended statement. First, he points out that it is unclear which description the hearer will be using in her amended statement. The description which according to the hearer is suited for

picking out the speaker's intended referent may be a description which the speaker is unaware of. For example, because she is misinformed about the correct designation. It is thus very difficult, if not impossible, to establish any amended statement. Donnellan's second point is, however, that this is inconsequential, in so far as "the notion of the amended statement really plays no role anyway" (Dennellan, 1966, p. 294n).

When setting out to understand the speaker's original statement, the hearer goes directly for the speaker's intended referent. The hearer's first question is what the speaker wanted to refer to. Once she thinks she knows this, she directly asks whether the speaker's referent has the properties the speaker ascribes to it. There is no reason at that point to go back and amend the original statement and evaluate it for truth or falsity. The speaker's original statement is only used as a springboard for arriving at the speaker's intention. Not only is the original statement not truth evaluated, as Strawson admits, but neither is any amended statement's truth evaluated. It is the speaker's intended meaning which is directly truth evaluated. The role of the original statement is purely instrumental; it is not even amended, it is simply left aside.

It should be stressed, of course, that generally the hearer's getting at the speaker's specific intention will be facilitated by the speaker's using the designator in accordance with her general intention. But if, for some reason or other, there is a clash between her general intention with the designator and her specific intention with it, the hearer, in most cases, is not particularly concerned with the speaker's general intention.

Smith as Referent

Let us now consider a different kind of scenario. It is, of course, equally possible that the hearer takes the predication to be about the person she knows as Smith. The hearer knows that there is one unique martini drinker at the party and the description used by the speaker, "the man drinking martini", accordingly applies to him. There is, as far as the hearer is aware, no evidence which points in a different direction. Consequently, the hearer takes the referent of the definite description directly to be Smith. Is this not a case where the hearer is concerned with the semantic referent of the speaker's definite description? As we will see, she is rather concerned with Smith *qua* intended referent.

Imagine now that, even though the hearer initially takes the predication to be about Smith, the continuation of the conversation makes the hearer aware that the speaker, by her use of the definite description in question, wanted to refer to the water-drinking person. The most natural thing for the hearer to do is to adapt her previous understanding. She might certainly think that the speaker was mistaken about who is drinking martini, and that she herself is better informed. She might also think that the speaker's expression of her thought was faulty and that she herself had the best reasons to take the speaker to be talking about Smith. She might even think that this certainly was an incorrect use of the definite de-

scription. But now, given that she knows whom the speaker wanted to refer to, such issues are of little importance. The question for many hearers is not whether they understand speakers according to the rules of language, but whether they understand speakers according to their wishes. Once the hearer is confident that she understands what the speaker means, there is no further issue as to what the meaning of the speaker's words on this occasion of use is. The hearer did not understand the speaker as the speaker wanted to be understood initially, and even though the fault was entirely with the speaker, there is no particular reason to insist on that fact. After all, even though the hearer initially took the referent to be Smith, unlike the previous case that we considered, she eventually behaves in the same way as when she immediately took the referent to be Jones.

Conflict

We must now consider whether hearers always leave the issue of the proper satisfaction of the definite description aside to the benefit of the speaker's intention. Are hearers always adapting to speakers? Strawson said that in some cases hearers, forced to choose between calling the speaker's utterance true or false, say it is true and that a speaker may be allowed to have said something true, even though the description which she used is faulty. We have so far considered cases where the hearer does precisely this. Strawson admits though that this hearer attitude is not universal, even if he does not say anything about in which cases hearers take this attitude. What forces hearers? When are speakers allowed to have spoken the truth? Sainsbury seems to have a different hearer attitude in mind when he says that hearers could not be faulted for understanding definite descriptions according to their strict content. If the hearer insists on the faultlessness of her interpretation, she may not be up to allowing the speaker to have spoken the truth. There are of course cases where the hearer is interested in pointing out to the speaker that there is a difference between the speaker's intended referent and the referent according to the content of the description used. Interpretation is not always collaborative, cooperative and charitable; it may be antagonistic and conflictual (see, e.g., Marmor, 2008; Lee & Pinker, 2010; Asher & Lascarides, 2013). Would the hearer for that reason claim that the speaker attempted to refer to Jones but failed, or that she the hearer correctly identified what the speaker said? Would the hearer say that one thing is what the speaker meant, another thing is what the words of the speaker meant on a given occasion? Would she make the distinction between the speaker's referent and the semantic referent of the definite description? It is now time to speak of these cases.

Let us then imagine that the hearer wants to insist that there was a difference between whom the speaker wanted to refer to and whom the definite description that she used actually applied to. The hearer points out to the speaker that, the description having the linguistic content that it has and the circumstances being as she knows them to be, as a matter of fact, the speaker referred to Smith or the

semantic referent of her definite description was Smith. What would the speaker say in response to this claim?

The speaker might admit that, as a matter of fact, the semantic referent of her definite description was not the person she intended to refer to. She might even admit that, as a matter of fact, she had, unbeknownst to herself, referred to Smith. But after having granted this point, the speaker would presumably draw the hearer's attention to other matters of fact. First, as a matter of fact, her intention was to refer to Jones, Jones being the person in her mind. The speaker is, of course, aware that this matter of fact cannot appear as such to the hearer. The definite description that she used was not, after all, particularly helpful in displaying this matter of fact to the hearer. Still, it is an important matter of fact. And now, at last, it is made manifest to the hearer. Second, the speaker would certainly allege as another matter of fact that conversation and communication are about getting at the speaker's point. Given the hearer's engagement in communication with the speaker, it would be quite difficult for the hearer to deny. Given that the hearer now is informed about the speaker's intention, why should she insist that the speaker originally did not convey accurately the referent that she had in mind? Third, the speaker may question the foundation of the hearer's claim. To whom the description "the man drinking martini" actually applies is a factual matter. What is the guarantee that the hearer is right about who is drinking martini and who is not? Are they going to have sips in order to ascertain the semantic referent? Is it not obvious to everyone concerned that such a manoeuvre would be ridiculous and serve no sensible purpose at all? In short, the speaker's response to the hearer's claim that the semantic referent of her definite description was Smith would be that this claim is possibly false and in any case irrelevant.

The upshot is that the hearer insisting on the semantic reference of a definite description would have to motivate the interest she takes in semantic reference. It seems to me that the hearer's only reason for insisting on the semantic reference is to justify her own interpretation. The hearer's insistence on the semantic reference is a way to enforce the faultlessness of her interpretation. But if this is the hearer's purpose in insisting on semantic reference, it should be stressed that this purpose can be served without invoking the notion of semantic reference. By avoiding semantic reference, the hearer would escape the charges of possible falsity and irrelevance.

The important point for the hearer in the kind of case we are considering is that the linguistic meaning of the definite description and the circumstances being what they were, the hearer was completely justified in taking the referent to be Smith. This point can be made in a straightforward way by the claim that the hearer was justified in thinking that the speaker wanted to refer to Smith. As such it is a claim about the speaker's reference. It is highly relevant and the possible falsity of the claim as to the satisfier of the description is inessential. If the hearer construes her taking the reference to be Smith as a claim about the semantic reference, she will run the risk of irrelevance and also be challenged as to the

foundation of this contention. The hearer might easily avoid all this by construing her taking the reference to be Smith as a claim about the speaker's reference.

Discussion

Sainsbury ends his considerations with the following remark: "A hearer is not obliged, in order to reach a proper understanding, to chase through the various possible errors of which a speaker might be guilty" (Sainsbury, 2006, p. 415).

The notion of proper understanding here is intriguing. We are to imagine the hearer telling the speaker that her interpretation of the speaker's utterance represents the correct identification of what the speaker said, despite the speaker's protestations that her intended meaning was different. An understanding unrelated to the speaker's intention may perhaps in some sense be proper, but in any case it is hardly appropriate. For what purpose would it serve the hearer to have reached an understanding which has no function in the conversational interaction? A hearer is certainly not obliged to chase through the various possible errors of which the speaker might be guilty. Neither is she obliged to listen to the speaker at all. But if she listens to the speaker, if she is engaged in conversation with her, what errors is she not prepared to chase through?

Capone says, in the same vein as Sainsbury: "a speaker who says 'The man drinking a martini' intending to refer to the man drinking water is literally saying something false (however charitably interpreted)" (Capone, 2011, p. 157n; cf. Bontly, 2005). But what is literal meaning to a charitable interpreter? Even uncharitable interpreters ought to couch their claims in terms of what they (pretend to) perceive as speaker reference, as I suggested above. If not, they will not appear to be engaged in conversation at all, in which case their interpretations will hardly be given any weight. The interpretive attitude suggested by Sainsbury and Capone is, in fact, opposed to the natural interests of a hearer.

I have attempted to show that speakers and hearers engaged in conversational interaction do not take interest in such a thing as the semantic reference of a definite description. They are solely concerned with the speaker's reference. When the hearer is confronted with a definite description, she wants to know whether the speaker intends an attributive use or a referential use, and in the latter case, the hearer's question is not what satisfies the description, but what is in the speaker's mind. This is the case also in conflictual interpretation. Even if an object different from the one intended by the speaker satisfies the description and the hearer on that account holds the speaker responsible for referring to the particular object uniquely satisfying the description, the hearer is not concerned with the actual semantic reference of the definite description. She is rather concerned with the faultlessness of her interpretation, which is not to be concerned with semantic reference, but with what the hearer had good reasons to perceive as the speaker's reference. A claim about semantic reference is not a sensible move in conversational interaction.

But does the possible fact that speakers and hearers engaged in conversation take no interest in such a thing as the semantic reference of definite descriptions prove that there is no such thing? It might be pointed out that in general, it is not the case that our lack of interest in a thing is an argument for the inexistence of the thing. However, the relevance of such an objection seems to presuppose that the reference of definite descriptions is something of a natural kind. The traditional question concerning definite descriptions is what the structure of their meaning is, what kind of contribution they make to sentences containing them. Do definite descriptions contribute to existential general statements of singular propositions? If the latter, are they about what satisfies the descriptive conditions or what the speaker is thinking of? It is perhaps possible that such a meaning could be discovered by semantical investigations. But in many statements the question appears rather as a matter of decision than as a matter of discovery. Witness Sainsbury, who says that “[w]e are not compelled to say that this failure really amounts to success” (Sainsbury, 2016, p. 415) and Strawson, on the other hand, saying that “if forced to choose between calling what was said true or false, we shall be more inclined to say that it was true” (Strawson, 1954, p. 227). If the purpose of semantic theorizing about definite descriptions is to account for linguistic communication by means of them and it is independently established that the determination of semantic reference has no role to play in the hearer’s arriving at the speaker’s intended referent, nor in the conversational interaction between speaker and hearer, it seems, in any case, that any discovery in this regard would be inconsequential and, consequently, no decision is called for. We had better stop asking what the semantic reference of definite descriptions is, for such a notion plays neither a theoretical nor a practical role.

Conclusion

In order to counter Donnellan’s contentious suggestions that the referential/attributive distinction is semantic and that a speaker may say something true although the object she wants to talk about does not satisfy the definite description she uses, Kripke has recourse to the distinction between semantic reference and speaker’s reference. I have argued that the category of semantic reference is not applicable to the interpretive interaction between speaker and hearer. Most hearers on most occasions of their interpretive career are cooperative: they want to know what speakers mean. Therefore, semantic reference is of no concern for them. Even when hearers take a conflictual approach to interpretation insisting that the words meant something different from what the speaker meant, they had better not invoke semantic reference. For in order for their claim to be of concern for the speaker, they had better couch it in terms of what they perceived as the speaker’s reference. If the task is one of “handling ordinary discourse” (Kripke, 1977, p. 255), as Kripke himself says, I think semantic reference is unnecessary.

There is no reason to say that the referential/attributive distinction is semantic. At the linguistic level, definite descriptions are items which speakers use to make

general existential statements as well as singular statements (cf. Moldovan, 2019). There is no reason to be concerned with any semantic level at all. Whether a given use of a definite description is referential or attributive is a question of what the speaker means, i.e. it is a wholly pragmatic issue. In so far as the question for the hearer is not whom the description applies to as a matter of fact, but to whom the speaker wanted to refer, the hearer does not ask whether the speaker's sentence is true, but truth-evaluates the speaker's intended meaning. The speaker might say something true by the utterance of a sentence containing a faulty description, in the sense that she is taken by the hearer to convey something true.

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