

Specificity and referentiality

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1. INTRODUCTION.

Indefinite descriptions have been claimed to show an ambiguity, often labeled a specific/nonspecific ambiguity, when they occur in simple sentences which contain no (other) sentence operators with which to vary their scope. Karttunen (1969), for example, observed that a sentence like (1) could be used to make two different kinds of statements.

(1) I talked with a logician. [= Karttunen 1969, ex. 20a]

On a specific construal, Karttunen points out, the speaker has a particular individual in mind, and the object NP is replaceable with other phrases which describe or refer to that person, e.g. *Rudolf Carnap, a famous philosopher*. On the other hand on the nonspecific understanding, as Karttunen also points out, (1) tells instead what KIND of a person the speaker talked with. (Cf. Karttunen 1969, 14f.) The latter understanding corresponds to what would be expressed by Russell's analysis of indefinite NPs, as shown in (2).

(2) x[Logician (x) & Talked-with (I, x)]

The truth conditions expressed in (2) are satisfied whenever there is a logician who I talked with; nothing is implied about there being some specific logician in question. Thus it is the specific reading which is the problematic one.

This claim about the ambiguity of indefinites is reminiscent of the claim of Donnellan (1966) that definite descriptions may be used referentially as well as attributively. My favorite illustrative example of Donnellan's is (3):

(3) Who is the man drinking a martini?

Suppose the leader of an Alcoholics Anonymous group has been told that someone has smuggled a martini into the meeting. Naturally he needs to correct the situation, and asks (3) using the definite description attributively. If it turns out that the rumor is false and there is no one drinking a martini, then there is nobody who the AA leader is asking the identity of. A referential use, on the other hand, might occur in a bar, where the speaker has glimpsed a glass of that distinctive martini shape in the hand of a tall dark handsome stranger and addresses (3) to her neighbor. In this case the asker's primary concern is learning who this individual is, and the fact that he is drinking a martini is not essential – she might have asked instead who the man in the blue shirt was (assuming the putative martini drinker was also wearing a blue shirt). As with indefinites, it is the referential interpretation which causes problems. The attributive reading is what would be captured in Russell's truth conditions for definite descriptions.

Kripke (1977) had given arguments against considering Donnellan's referential-attributive distinction to be semantic, and Ludlow & Neale (1991) have argued along similar lines that the specific/nonspecific distinction in indefinite descriptions is not semantic but rather pragmatic. This paper responds to some of the arguments presented

by Ludlow & Neale and Kripke, and presents arguments and evidence that both distinctions **are** semantic.

The organization of the paper is as follows: in the next section we will look at the arguments of Ludlow & Neale against the claim that the specific-nonspecific distinction amounts to a semantic ambiguity, and in section 3 we will look at Kripke's arguments that Donnellan's attributive-referential distinction is not semantic. Section 4 will contain some positive arguments in favor of a semantic distinction in both cases (definites and indefinites). The penultimate section will return to the issue of the nature of the problematic specific-referential readings. This section will also relate the specific-nonspecific and referential-attributive ambiguities to the traditional *de dicto-de re* ambiguities, responding to Kripke's arguments that there is no such relation. And the final section will contain concluding remarks.

2. THE ARGUMENTS OF LUDLOW & NEALE.

Before considering the arguments of Ludlow & Neale we should take note of their view of the nature of the specific reading of indefinites. As they describe it, the specific reading would be a referential reading, and (as has become quite customary now) they adopt Russell's view of such readings.

On Russell's account, a referring expression '*b*' may be combined with a (monadic) predicate expression to express a proposition which simply could not be entertained or expressed if the entity referred to by '*b*' did not exist. Russell often puts this by saying that the referent of '*b*' is a constituent of such a proposition; it will be convenient to follow him in this, but nothing in the present paper turns on this conception of a so-called *singular* proposition. (Ludlow & Neale 1991, 172; italics in original.)

(Which individual it is which is a constituent of the proposition expressed is presumably determined by the intentions of the speaker; we will be returning to this issue shortly.)

Although Ludlow & Neale say that adopting this view does not matter for their arguments, in fact, as we will see, their arguments do depend crucially on this view of the specific reading. But this is not the only possible view – an alternative will be presented below.

Ludlow & Neale cite three arguments which Russell (1919) gave in support of his quantificational analysis of indefinite descriptions, and opposed to any referential interpretation. Russell's example is (4)

(4) I met a man.

Suppose that the speaker of (4) met Jones, and that (4) is the report of that incident. Nevertheless it would not be contradictory to assert (5):

(5) I met a man but I did not meet Jones.

(5) would be false, under the circumstances, but not contradictory. But a referential interpretation of Russell's type would presumably have Jones be a constituent of the proposition expressed by (4) on that interpretation, making (5) contradictory.

The second argument is that an addressee can perfectly well understand an utterance of (4) without any knowledge of Jones – in other words all that is required for an understanding of (5) is a grasping of the Russellian quantificational proposition. No

more specific knowledge is necessary. The third argument depends on the fact that a sentence like (6)

(6) I saw a perpetual motion machine.

may be used to express a proposition (albeit a false one) even though there is no possible referent for the indefinite description. But on the Russellian view of singular propositions that is not possible, since the referent of the phrase *a perpetual motion machine* would have to be a constituent of the proposition expressed on the referential interpretation.

All three of these arguments suffer from a disability (acknowledged by Ludlow & Neale for the first). No one denies that indefinite descriptions have a purely quantificational reading which would allow a noncontradictory understanding of (5), which someone who doesn't know Jones could well understand, and which would allow (6) to express a proposition. Thus these arguments do not show that sentences like (1) and (4) are not ambiguous. However, even if we granted that there is no understanding of (4) on which it requires specific knowledge of an individual, that (5) does not have any inconsistent understandings, and that (6) does not have any understandings on which it fails to express a proposition, these arguments are still not conclusive.

Let us consider an alternative view of the specific reading of indefinites – one based in part on Kaplan (1978) and Montague (1973). On this analysis, NPs always express individual concepts – functions from possible worlds to entities – and the difference between nonspecific and specific (or attributive and referential) understandings is that the former express individual concepts whose values may vary from world to world, while the latter express constant individual concepts. (This suggestion has also been made by Dahl (1988, 16).) Given such an understanding of the specific reading of indefinites, (5) would not express a contradiction, even on the specific reading, so Ludlow & Neale's first argument does not raise problems for this view. Similarly one can have a grasp of a constant individual concept without knowing any individual – one just knows that **there is** some individual in question – that the descriptive content of the NP is not crucial but instead the individual is. So Ludlow & Neale's second argument is vitiated as well. Finally, given the individual concept analysis of specific readings, examples like (6) will be able to express a proposition – one that is false for the same reason the nonspecific reading is false, namely, because there is no individual meeting the content of the description in the actual world.

This view of referentiality has a lot to recommend it in addition to its utility in countering the arguments of Ludlow & Neale. One is that it offers an analysis for proper names of non-existent objects – traditionally a problem for direct reference theories of naming. Another, related, advantage is that true negative existence statements, such as that in (7), are not a problem.

(7) Pegasus does not exist.

On the individual concept view, *Pegasus* expresses a constant individual concept which is not instantiated at the actual world, making (7) simply true, and not meaningless or empty of propositional content.

We will return to the issue of the nature of referentiality in the penultimate section below, but at this point we can conclude that the arguments of Ludlow & Neale which were borrowed from Russell, do not establish their goal.

3. KRIPKE'S ARGUMENTS.

Kripke (1977) had argued against viewing Donnellan's referential/attributive distinction as semantic and Ludlow & Neale cited these arguments approvingly and reprised analogs for indefinites. Kripke's alternative was that the referential understanding was an aspect of **speaker** meaning, different from linguistic meaning. Kripke had three main arguments against viewing Donnellan's distinction as semantic; one methodological, one a very general and innovative form, and one which relied on the interpretation of pronouns.

Kripke's methodological argument is rather obvious, and relies on Grice's Modified Occam's Razor (Grice 1978, 118f), which dictates that one must not proliferate meanings without warrant. Of course this kind of argument by itself cannot be decisive. For one thing the question of how much warrant is required before one can accept an ambiguity is a vague one. And for another, it is unclear why we should assume a lack of ambiguity where one is felt.

Kripke's second argument involves a novel argument form of the following structure: if phenomenon A would occur in a language stipulated to have property X, then its occurrence in English cannot argue that English does not have property X. The property in question is having definite descriptions interpreted as Russell claimed, and the phenomenon is an understanding like Donnellan's referential reading. Kripke argued that in a language stipulated to have definite descriptions construed as Russell analyzed them, speakers would still want to convey statements about individuals while using definite descriptions. He pointed out that even in ordinary English this kind of thing occurs "in 'arch' uses of existential quantification: 'Exactly *one person* (or: *some person* or other) is drinking champagne in that corner, and I hear he is romantically linked with Jane Smith'" (Kripke 1977, 266; italics in original). This argument, while clever, is not really conclusive either. We might use the same argument form to argue, for example, that the word *want* does not mean 'desire', because if it only meant 'lack', people would use it to express desire as well. Obviously historically that is exactly what happened – initially the word meant 'lack', but when enough people had used the word to express desire long enough, it actually acquired that meaning. (See also the discussion in Reimer 1998a.)

The third argument involved a modification of an example given by Linsky (1963), and cited by Donnellan (1966). We imagine a woman walking arm and arm with her lover, who is mistaken by another person for her husband. The following dialog ensues:

- (8) A. "Her husband is kind to her."
B. "No, he isn't. The man you're referring to isn't her husband."

The problem is the pronoun *he* in B's utterance. Apparently it is intended to refer to the husband of the woman. However one aspect of Donnellan's account was that, on the referential reading, definite descriptions can be used to refer to entities that do not meet the descriptive content of the NP. In this case A has apparently used the NP *her husband* to refer to the lover, so there should be no antecedent for B's use of *he* to refer to the husband.

This argument depends crucially on that particular aspect of Donnellan's account which says that descriptive content can be overridden by speaker's intentions. However

this is not a necessary feature of a referential reading, construed otherwise as Donnellan intended, as has been argued by Kaplan (1978) and Wettstein (1981). And there is independent evidence against this claim of Donnellan's. In fact, as Wilson (1991) has argued, that quality (reference to an entity not semantically related to the noun phrase used) is characteristic of **speaker's** reference as opposed to semantic reference, and holds for both referentially and attributively used definite descriptions as well as proper names. Leaving that aspect aside we still have a clear distinction between two semantic readings, even requiring that in **both** cases the descriptive material must be satisfied. And without this feature of Donnellan's account, Kripke's argument does not go through.

As we have seen, none of Kripke's arguments against viewing Donnellan's referential-attributive distinction as semantic is conclusive. But this is no surprise; Kripke himself expressed a certain amount of doubt about his conclusions. His arguments concerned methodological rather than substantive points, and he said at the outset of his paper "[a]ny conclusions about Russell's views *per se*, or Donnellan's, must be tentative" (Kripke 1977, 255).

4. POSITIVE ARGUMENTS.

There are several positive arguments in favor of a semantic analysis for both the referential-attributive distinction and the specific-nonspecific distinction. One of these is the strong intuition that so many people, working independently, have found. Of course intuitions about meaning by themselves would not normally be taken as conclusive, but nevertheless they must be important considerations. As Kripke himself, has said in connection with a different issue (the intuitive difference between necessary and contingent properties of an entity):

...some philosophers think that something's having intuitive content is very inconclusive evidence in favor of it. I think it is very heavy evidence in favor of anything, myself. I really don't know, in a way, what more conclusive evidence one can have about anything ultimately speaking. (Kripke 1980, 42)

Reimer (1998b) has taken a line somewhat similar to Kripke's, but applied to the very issue at hand. She argues that if a sentence is standardly used to convey a certain type of proposition, where that proposition is suitably constrained by the linguistic meanings of the parts of the sentence, then, *ceteris paribus*, it expresses that proposition.

Wilson (1991) has pointed out that definite descriptions have pronominal uses, including bound variable uses, as in (9)

- (9) a. Serena Williams fought hard but the defending French open champion could not extinguish Henin-Hardenne.
b. Every Bulgarian astronomer was greeted by someone who knew the scientist as a youth.

He argues in addition that pronouns and demonstratives may have attributive uses, and in fact, that all kinds of NPs have a whole range of uses – some attributive and some referential. Since the avid Russellian would hardly want to claim that referential uses of pronouns contain implicit descriptive material provided from context and are to be treated as attributive, it does not make sense to assume that definite descriptions cannot be referential.

Finally, for indefinite descriptions, it can be pointed out that (10a) has a reading which (10b) does not have:

- (10) a. I had lunch with a logician.
b. Have lunch with a logician!

In a null context (10b) lacks a specific reading because it would be infelicitous to suggest that someone have lunch with a specific logician without giving them enough information to figure out which one. The contrast with (10a) provides additional intuitive support for the distinction.

5. MORE ON THE NATURE OF SPECIFICITY.

I have alluded to Kaplan (1978)'s reanalysis of Donnellan's referential-attributive distinction as a difference between whether a description is taken as simply expressing Russell's analysis of definite descriptions, or whether it is used quasi-demonstratively, to pick out a particular individual and thus be part of the expression of a singular proposition. Kaplan incorporated Russell's view of singular propositions, that they contain actual individuals ("That's right, John himself, right there, trapped in a proposition" (Kaplan 1978, 223)), but as noted above, the ambiguity he described could equally well be represented by propositions containing two different kinds of individual concepts – inconstant ones, whose values vary from possible world to possible world, and constant ones, whose value is the same individual in every world (or in every world where that individual exists), the latter of which correspond to Russellian singular propositions.

At the end of his paper, Kaplan gave a list titled "Exciting Future Episodes". The fourth of these was the following: "Extending the demonstrative notion to *indefinite* descriptions to see if it is possible to so explicate the \pm specific idea. (It isn't.)" (Kaplan 1978, 241; italics in original). The problem, presumably, is that of determining the referent (the value of the constant individual concept) for the specific reading of an example like (11)

- (11) A book is on the table.

Suppose the utterer of (11) believes that Jespersen's *Language* is on the table, and intended their utterance to be about that book. If we take the speaker's intention as crucial in determining the individual in question, then we will have to take (11) as false if Jespersen's *Language* is not on the table, but another book is on the table. But intuitively (11) has no false reading. (This is an analog of Russell's first argument cited by Ludlow & Neale and reviewed above in section 2.) However it has been suggested (Abbott 1994) that we might be able to revise a Montague-style semantics, which includes individual concepts as more or less basic level categories, so that it includes two types of individual concepts – constant as well as inconstant. Then the specific interpretation of (11) would assert a proposition about a book, that it is on the table, and would be true on all those possible worlds in which that very book was on the table, although it would still be indeterminate as to which book was in question. On the nonspecific interpretation, (11) would be true in any possible world in which the table had any book on it. (I am ignoring the addition ambiguity in (11) of whether *the table* is taken as referential or attributive.)

On this way of construing the referential-attributive and specific-nonspecific ambiguities, they is entirely parallel to the *de dicto-de re* ambiguity found in opaque

contexts. However, in his paper Kripke remarked: ‘Many able people, in and out of print, have implied that Donnellan’s distinction **has something to do with**, can be identified with, or can replace, the *de dicto-de re* distinction....’ (1977, 258; bolding added). The following section of his paper was an attempt to counter these ideas. In the remainder of this paper I will argue that while Kripke showed that Donnellan’s distinction is not identical with the *de dicto-de re* distinction, and that it cannot replace it, he did not show that the two had nothing to do with each other.

5.1 Kripke’s argument. There were three prongs to Kripke’s argument against a relation between Donnellan’s distinction and the *de dicto-de re* distinction. Kripke argued first of all that the *de dicto* reading, which bears similarity to Donnellan’s attributive use, cannot be identified with EITHER the attributive OR the referential use. The reason for this is that, on Kripke’s view, *de dicto* noun phrases (NPs) do not have their customary reference. Here Kripke follows Frege’s (1892) analysis of opaque contexts, according to which expressions shift reference in these contexts and denote their customary sense. ‘If a description is embedded in a (*de dicto*) intensional context, we cannot be said to be talking *about* the thing described, either *qua* its satisfaction of the description or *qua* anything else’ (Kripke 1977, 158, italics in original). In other words Kripke seems to be saying that descriptions used *de dicto* cannot be said to have either an attributive or a referential use. Fair enough.

Kripke’s second point was that the referential use cannot be identified with the *de re* understanding. ‘In “Smith’s murderer, whoever he may be, is known to the police, but they’re not saying,”...“Smith’s murderer” is used attributively, but is *de re*’ (Kripke 1977, 258f). Of course it is also possible to use a *de re* description referentially, as would plausibly be the case if one said ‘Smith’s murderer, an old crony of mine, is known to the police.’ So a *de re* description can still be used either attributively or referentially, whereas a *de dicto* description on Kripke’s view, as noted above, does not have either use. So we cannot identify the *de re* reading with the referential use, nor the *de dicto* reading with the attributive use.

The third prong of Kripke’s attack was more general. On Russell’s view (cf. Russell 1905), apparently embraced by Kripke, the *de dicto-de re* distinction is actually one of scope. This means that the number of readings increases with every layer of embedding under an intensional operator. (12) illustrates this effect.

- (12) The oracle predicted that Oedipus would want to marry his mother.
The three Russellian analyses of (12) are crudely indicated in (12a) – (12c).
- (12) a. the oracle predicted [Oedipus would want [[Oed.’s mother]_x Oed. marry x]]
b. [Oed.’s mother]_x the oracle predicted [Oedipus would want [Oed. marry x]]
c. the oracle predicted [[Oed.’s mother]_x Oedipus would want [Oed. marry x]]

If the description *his mother* has narrowest scope, as in (12a), we have a false reading according to which the oracle predicted that Oedipus would want to commit incest. If *his mother* has widest scope, as in (12b), then we get an unlikely reading on which the oracle made its prediction about a specific individual. The most plausible reading, on which the oracle predicted concerning Oedipus’s mother, whoever that should be, that Oedipus would want to marry her, is the one where *his mother* has intermediate scope as in (12c).

Kripke’s conclusion: ‘No *twofold* distinction can replace Russell’s notion of scope. In particular, **neither the *de dicto-de re* distinction nor the referential-**

attributive distinction can do so' (1977, 259; italics in original, bolding added, irrelevant footnote omitted).

5.2. My reply. When it comes to showing that there is no relation between Donnellan's distinction and the *de dicto-de re* distinction, Kripke's last argument undermines his other two. The first two were aimed at showing that the *de dicto-de re* distinction could not be identified with the attributive-referential distinction. But once we see that the readings labeled '*de dicto*' and '*de re*' are actually the result of a systematic scope phenomenon, there arises the possibility of seeing attributive and referential understandings as the same type of phenomenon at a different level – the level of the speech act. More specifically, we can hypothesize that an attributive assertion is the expression of a speaker's *de dicto* thought and a referential assertion is the expression of a *de re* thought.¹

Kripke's observations concerning the possible cooccurrences of readings would follow naturally on this view. Consider a typical sentence describing a propositional attitude, i.e. something of the form of (13)

(13) X believes/hopes/desires that ...NP...

where X is the holder of the propositional attitude in question, and "NP" stands for a definite description occurring within the sentential complement of the propositional attitude verb. As Kripke noted, when the description in such a sentence is interpreted *de dicto*, "we cannot be said to be talking *about* the thing described", so there is nothing for the speaker to have a *de re* or *de dicto* attitude about. However when a description is used *de re* we do have reference to an entity via it, and so the speaker will have one of two attitudes. One possibility is that their conception is referential (they have a *de re* thought), and so they attribute to the referent of the subject of the sentence ("X" in the schema above) a *de re* attitude about a particular entity. The other possibility is that their own conception of the situation is an attributive one (a *de dicto* attitude), where they attribute to somebody else a *de re* attitude about whoever or whatever fits the description.

For an oracle who thinks and says (14)

(14) Oedipus will want to marry his mother.

these three possibilities correspond to the three readings of (12). (12a) corresponds to (14) with a *de dicto* interpretation for *his mother*. (12b) corresponds to the situation where (14) expresses a *de re* thought on the part of the oracle, and this thought attributes a *de re* desire to Oedipus. (12c) corresponds to the case where the Oracle's conception of the situation is *de dicto* with respect to the phrase *his mother*, but he is attributing a *de re* desire to Oedipus. This is the most plausible situation, where the oracle, in asserting (14), is predicting, concerning Oedipus's mother whoever that should be, that Oedipus would want to marry that individual. Of course when (12) itself is asserted on the widest scope reading ((12b)), there will be two possible uses of *his mother* depending on whether the speaker wishes to make an attributive or a referential assertion.

If this view of the relation between Donnellan's distinction and the *de dicto-de re* distinction is correct, it is another argument in favor of the semantic relevance of Donnellan's distinction.

¹ For arguments in favor of *de re* thought, see Burge 1977. I assume that it is not controversial that we have *de dicto* thoughts.

6. Concluding remarks.

In this paper I have tried to rebut some of the arguments of Kripke, and Neale & Ludlow, against construing the specific-nonspecific ambiguity of indefinite descriptions in ordinary contexts (that is, not within the scope of any sentential operators), and have tried to add some positive arguments in favor of viewing this distinction as semantic. I have also argued for one particular analysis of this distinction, which is helpful in rebutting some of the arguments against it. But there is much more to be said on this topic; a more thorough critique of Neale & Ludlow is needed, as well as a critique of the arguments in Neale (1990) aimed at Donnellan's referential-attributive distinction, and a careful formalization of the proposal suggested here should be carried out. Hopefully these activities will be accomplished in the future.

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