

REFERENTIAL DESCRIPTIONS: A NOTE ON BACH

MICHAEL DEVITT

The Graduate Center of the City University of New York

ABSTRACT

Bach fails to give a satisfactory pragmatic account of referential uses of definite descriptions because he does not explain *how* a description's quantificational meaning plays a "key role" in those uses. Bach's criticism that my semantic account does not explain how the hearer understands a description is misguided. Bach's denial that a pragmatic account is committed to the attributive use being more fundamental detaches meaning from use in an unacceptable way.

Key words: Donnellan, definite descriptions, indefinite descriptions, referential uses, attributive uses, implicatures, demonstratives, Bach, Grice, Neale, Russell

Kent Bach and I agree on a lot about the referential uses of definite descriptions, as he notes in "Referentially Used Descriptions: A Reply to Devitt",¹ and yet we disagree on the explanation of these uses: he thinks that they are to be explained pragmatically whereas I think that they are to be explained semantically. His paper advances the understanding of this disagreement. In this note I shall attempt to advance it further.

1. *Bach's pragmatic explanation*

I claim that a pragmatic explanation of referential uses must be based on the view that a person using a description referentially in uttering a sentence conveys a singular proposition *while saying a general quantificational proposition* (p. 18). And the problem for any such explanation is that "*there is frequently no general proposition that the speaker might plausibly be*

¹ This volume. All unidentified references to Bach are to this article and all unidentified references to me will be to "Referential Descriptions and Conversational Implicatures", also in this volume.

thought to have said” (p. 19). Now it is true that, in presenting this argument, the pragmatic explanation that I have particularly in mind is the Gricean one that referential uses are generalized conversational implicatures, but the argument is supposed to be quite general, aimed at *any* pragmatic explanation including Bach’s. Bach likes the argument but thinks that it does not apply to his view. In supposing it does, he alleges, I have wrongly taken him to hold that referential uses are *more* “akin to generalized implicatures” than he thinks they are. This allegation is accompanied by a lot about what his view is *not*. In particular, it is not the “view that ‘saying a general proposition’ is the means by which a speaker conveys a singular proposition about the intended referent.” He does not think that the quantificational meaning *identifies* the referent. Indeed, he does not think that there is a route from the general proposition said to the singular one meant. So he is under no obligation to explain the route (pp. 37-38).

This is puzzling: What then is “the role played by the univocal quantificational meaning of a definite description in effecting referential uses” (p. 38)? We clearly need a positive account of what this “key role” *is* and not simply a negative account of what it is *not*. Let us drop the somewhat technical talk of the speaker “saying” a general proposition because Bach and I may differ in our understanding of this (see his note 5). It is indubitably the case that, on his view, the meaning of the description in a referential use is quantificational and yet the speaker intends to convey a singular meaning about a particular object the speaker has in mind. So we are still left with the question: *Why* would the speaker think that his utterance would convey this singular meaning and *why* would the hearer take the utterance to convey this? What is the link between the meaning uttered and the meaning intended?

Consider the referential use of an obviously incomplete ‘the F’. Bach and I agree that “F” signifies the property of being F”. Bach goes on:

What about the role of ‘the’? When combined with a *singular* nominal, it signifies uniqueness....But if the description is incomplete, there is no unique F. Still, there must be some unique thing that is F that the speaker intends to refer to. The problem for the hearer is to figure out which thing that is. (p. 39)

The talk of “unique thing” can mislead. (What thing is *not* unique, in any sense that is relevant?). ‘Unique’ should be reserved for talk of ‘the’. On Bach’s Russellian view, ‘the F’ signifies an object to which ‘F’ *uniquely applies*. And what the speaker intends in using ‘the’ referentially is to *uniquely refer* to a certain F object, to convey a thought about an F object that he *has uniquely in mind*. But unique application and unique reference are very different matters. *Why* would the speaker think that uttering a term that signifies unique application would convey unique reference? And *why* would the hearer take it to convey this? Since the description obviously fails to apply uniquely and yet the speaker clearly means *something*, the hearer will search for something other than the quantificational meaning that the speaker might mean. But why would the hearer sup-

pose that the speaker means something about the particular F he has in mind rather than about some other F? Bach simply persists in not answering these crucial questions. Distancing himself from the Gricean conversational-implicature view does not make the questions go away. Bach simply takes for granted what he needs to explain.² So he has failed to give a pragmatic explanation of referential uses.

I point out that the defender of Russell “needs to provide an argument that referential uses are akin to indubitably pragmatic phenomena” (p. 20). Bach thinks these uses are pragmatic because, like “Have you eaten?” and “I have nothing to wear”, they are examples of “standardized non-literality” (1994: 79-81). But *how* are they like these other examples? We need an argument (c.f. Devitt 2004: 286).

2. *My semantic explanation*

Here, briefly, is my semantic explanation:

There is a semantic convention of using ‘the *F*’ to refer to *x* which exploits both a causal-perceptual link between the speaker and *x* and a meaning of ‘*F*’ (which might be ambiguous)...A speaker expressing a singular thought about a certain object participates in the referential convention and thus exploits the causal-perceptual link to that object; a hearer participates in the referential convention and thus takes account of clues to what has been thus exploited. (p. 22)

Interestingly, Bach responds to this explanation by accusing *me* of not even beginning to address crucial questions! “Devitt does not say how the hearer manages to disambiguate the description, much less how, once he recognizes its use as referential, he identifies the intended referent” (p. 41). So there are two problems I am alleged not to address. (1) My disambiguation problem is virtually identical to *Bach’s* problem of saying how the hearer manages to tell that the speaker is using a description referentially rather than attributively. Since Bach discusses *his* problem at some length (2004: 198-204 *passim*, 224), I discuss *mine* elsewhere (1981: 521-2), and, besides, the problems are instances of quite general problems, I thought that it was sufficient to cite these discussions, and some psychology (note 19), and leave it at that. I wonder why Bach thinks that it is not. (2) A speaker using a description referentially refers to the object that it is linked to in a certain causal-perceptual way. So to identify the referent the hearer has to use clues to what object is so linked; similarly, to identify the reference of a deictic demonstrative or pronoun.³ One clue provided by the referential use is that “the speaker *S* wishes to

² He refers (p. 40) to Bach 1994, ch. 6, for “a fuller explanation” but I find nothing in that chapter that answers these questions.

³ I am fond of likening referentially used descriptions to complex demonstratives (sec. 7; 2004: sec. 4). Bach resists this, making some claims about usage that I think are false (pp. 43-45). But then neither of us have done the field work to gather the evidence of usage. So the reader must decide whose claims seem the more plausible.

convey *S*'s intention that the audience *A* should identify the object *S* has in mind with an object that *A* has in mind independently of *S*" (2004: 293). Another clue is provided by what the speaker is, or has been, looking at. A lot more could clearly be said about the clues. I didn't attempt to say it in contrasting my view with that of pragmatists like Bach because saying it is irrelevant to the contrast. Everyone, *including Bach*, who accepts that a causal-perceptual link determines which object is referred to, and accepts that hearers typically manage to figure out which object this is, must accept that there are clues that enable the hearer to do so. We are all in the same boat. The difference between Bach and me is that I have an explanation of *how* the meaning of the referentially used description helps direct the hearer to look for clues to that causal-perceptual link whereas Bach has none. For, on my view that meaning is a referential one that exploits that very link⁴ whereas on Bach's view that meaning is a quantificational one that Bach has failed to relate to the link: see the earlier unanswered questions. That's one reason why my view is better.

3. *Meaning detached from use*

I offer a further consideration against a pragmatic view of referential uses:

it would have to have been the case that, historically, the quantificational convention for 'the', hence the attributive use of definites, *came before* their referential use. For that convention features in pragmatic explanations of the referential use. A person has to be already able to exploit that convention to say the general proposition, in order to convey the singular one. The problem is: Do we have any reason to believe that the attributive use did precede the referential use? (p. 19-20)

Bach objects that I am here "equating the attributive use with the quantificational meaning" (p. 42) and hence wrongly think "that on any pragmatic approach to referential uses the attributive use is more fundamental" (p. 42). I am not making that equation and I think the pragmatic approach *is* committed to the attributive use being more fundamental (in the sense of coming first). Bach's contrary view detaches meaning from use in an unacceptable way. For, where did the quantificational meaning come from? The answer must be: from attributive uses. The meaning must have been established and sustained by the regular use of descriptions attributively. How else? So since, on the pragmatic approach, the quantificational meaning must have preceded the referential use, then the attributive use must have preceded the referential use and hence be more fundamental. Meanings are not God given, they are created by use (or, occasionally, by stipulation).⁵

⁴ Bach raises the bizarre possibility that I think there is a "distinct referential convention for each object" (p. 41). What I think of course is that there is a convention of descriptions exploiting *a certain sort* of link to objects.

⁵ My thanks to Francesco Pupa for comments on a draft.

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Department of Philosophy
CUNY Graduate Center
The City University of New York
365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016, USA
MDevitt@gc.cuny.edu

