

# THE MAIN BONE OF CONTENTION

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## ABSTRACT

I enumerate the main disagreements between Devitt and me, and then elucidate the most fundamental one. It concerns what it takes to refer to something. Devitt takes a liberal view on this, according to which a speaker's having a certain object in mind and intending to refer to it puts the hearer in a position to form singular thoughts about it. There is no requirement that the hearer have any independent access to the object. My view is more restrictive, not allowing "reference borrowing" of the sort that Devitt apparently thinks referential uses of definite descriptions involve. For me, if the speaker has a certain object in mind and intends to refer the hearer to it, and the hearer recognizes this intention, that merely enables him to form a general thought. It does not enable him to form a singular thought about it himself.

**Key words:** attributive uses, definite descriptions, demonstratives, Devitt, Donnellan, Grice, implicatures, referential uses, Russell

This time around I will confine myself to identifying the points of disagreement between Michael Devitt and me. I will be brief. As I will suggest, our main point of disagreement goes beyond issues in the semantics and pragmatics of definite descriptions, and cannot be resolved here.

Devitt and I disagree on how referential uses of definite descriptions are to be explained. In fact, "A Note on Bach" suggests that in this regard we disagree on what we disagree about. He says it concerns whether referential uses are to be explained semantically (Devitt) or pragmatically (Bach). I don't think he quite means that. His point is that singular definite descriptions have referential meanings, as well as quantificational meanings, and that this is due to a semantic ambiguity in the definite article. But his explanation of referential uses is partly pragmatic, if for no other reason than that if definite descriptions are ambiguous, they must be disambiguated. And disambiguating – figuring out which way the speaker intends an expression to be taken – is a pragmatic matter.

The semantic-pragmatic question is important if for no other reason than this. On the ambiguity theory, it *seems* to be a remarkable linguistic coincidence that in many languages singular noun phrases introduced by the definite article should have both referential and quantificational meanings. One would expect there to be plenty of languages with two definite articles, each with one meaning, but there in fact aren't. The obvious way to avoid this problem is to suppose that the dual use of singular definite descriptions is a pragmatic regularity, one whose explanation is the same for any language that has a definite article.

At any rate, there is a further reason why, even if the referential/attributive distinction is partly explained by a semantic ambiguity, the explanation for referential uses is partly pragmatic. This reason applies whenever the description is incomplete (there is no unique F). For the hearer has to figure out not only *that* a use is referential but which F the speaker is using 'the F' to refer to. Even if Devitt's semantic convention for using descriptions to refer exists, obviously it does not determine which F a speaker is using 'the F' to refer to. According to Devitt, "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). But the causal-perceptual link that enables the speaker to form singular thoughts about a particular object and thereby be in a position to refer to that object is not the same causal-perceptual link that ties the hearer to that object and enables the hearer to form singular thoughts about it, including the thought that it is the object the speaker is talking about. The hearer first has to figure out which object that is. And that too is a pragmatic matter.

Devitt complains that I say a lot about what my view is not but not much about what it is. True, I do not spell how the pragmatic story goes, but my excuse is that there is nothing special that needs to be said in regard to the particular case of identifying a speaker's reference in using a definite description that isn't part of the general explanation for how hearers figure out what speakers mean when they don't make what they mean fully explicit. Philosophy can say only so much in this regard – the rest is a matter for cognitive and interpersonal psychology. I could cite the work of Grice and my own embellishments on it, but that probably wouldn't satisfy Devitt if what he is looking for is something specific to the case of identifying speakers' references with descriptions.

Devitt also complains about my account of how the quantificational meaning of definite descriptions facilitates referential uses. He contends that my account leaves their quantificational meaning "detached" from their referential use. Now he and I agree that most referential uses of definite descriptions are of incomplete ones and that most uses of incomplete ones are referential. But he is not satisfied with my appeal to the interaction between the definite article 'the' (in the unspecial case of English) and the singularity of the nominal it introduces to account for the implication of uniqueness by 'the F'. Given this implication and the fact that 'F' does not apply uniquely, the task of the hearer is to limit the range of the Fs under consideration to one. This can be done either

by implicitly restricting ‘F’, as if it were modified with an adjective or a relative clause, or by latching on to a particular F that one takes to be the F the speaker has in mind and intends to be referring one to. Either way, the hearer has to fill in the gap between the semantic content of the sentence the speaker utters and what he means in uttering it. As I suggested in my paper, there is no deep difference in what happens in the two cases, despite the fact in the referential case the speaker means a singular proposition and in the attributive case he means a general one. In either case the hearer has to find a plausible candidate for what the speaker could have intended by using ‘the F’ when ‘F’ does not uniquely apply to anything.

This leads me to the fundamental disagreement between Devitt and me. It concerns what it takes to refer. Devitt seems to take a liberal view of what it takes, on which a speaker’s having a certain object in mind and intending to refer to it puts the hearer in a position to form singular thoughts about the same object. There is no requirement that the hearer have any independent access to the object. My view, laid out, appropriately enough, in “What it takes to refer?”, is more restrictive, and does not allow “reference borrowing” of the sort that Devitt apparently thinks referential uses of definite descriptions involve. For me, unlike Devitt, if the speaker has a certain object in mind (by virtue of being in a “perceptual-causal link” to it) and intends to refer the hearer to it, and the hearer recognizes this intention, that is not enough to enable the hearer to form a singular thought about the object. It merely enables him to form a general thought, albeit one capable of being made true by the object in question (in non-modal cases anyway), but not a singular thought about that object. Merely knowing that someone has a certain object in mind in connection with his use of a definite description is not enough to put one in a position to form singular thoughts about that object oneself.

This, I believe, is the basic bone of contention between Devitt and me. It goes much deeper than our dispute about definite descriptions. If that is right, then he and I are not so much going around in circles as at an impasse.

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