Reference in Context: On Donnellan's
Essays on Reference, Language, and Mind

DUŠAN DOŽUDIĆ

Centre for Croatian Studies, University of Zagreb, Borongajska 83d, 10 000 Zagreb, Croatia
ddozudic@hrstud.hr

ABSTRACT: Donnellan's recently published *Essays on Reference, Language, and Mind* (2012) collect his seminal papers from 1960s and 1970s. In most of them, he introduces and defends two major, related views in the theory of reference. The first one concerns the functioning of definite descriptions, and the second one the nature of singular reference. Donnellan argues that definite descriptions are ambiguous between their referential and their attributive use, and that descriptions used referentially function more or less as other referring expressions, proper names and indexicals. All referential expressions, Donnellan further argues, do not function according to the principle of identifying descriptions, as most philosophers from Frege onward thought, but rather on the ground of being appropriately historically connected to a thing, which is their referent. Such a referent, Donnellan thinks, does not have to fit the descriptive content or identifying descriptions (if there are any) associated with these expressions. As such, the referential expressions are directly referring, contributing its referent, not the descriptive material, to the propositional content of sentences they occur within. In my paper I reflect on some important, but controversial points in Donnellan's papers, having to do with his understanding of the functioning of definite descriptions and proper names, and I relate these points to some subsequent discussions about the matters.

KEY WORDS: Attributive use, definite descriptions, direct reference, Donnellan, proper names, reference, referential use, the historical explanation theory of reference.

1

At a party you are staring at a loud person in the corridor, drinking a transparent shaken-not-stirred liquid with an olive, impertinently commenting other guests passing him by. You complain to your friend, "The man drinking a martini is irritating". "The man drinking a martini" is a definite

description, and in uttering the sentence one should expect that you have picked someone out, and attributed to that someone the irritation property. Accordingly, the uttered sentence says something true only if the particular person really is irritating. But how does "the man drinking a martini", or any other definite description for that matter, succeeds in picking out a particular, unique person or thing in this, or any other situation? Although Russell (1998) and Strawson (1998) disagreed on many points concerning functioning of definite descriptions, they agreed that you can properly pick out a thing using one, and say something true about a thing in uttering a sentence containing one, *only if* there is a unique something (at least in the context of utterance) that fits description's descriptive content. In the above case, then, in uttering "The man drinking a martini is irritating", you would say something true only if some particular person has the property of drinking a martini, and if she is irritating. Furthermore, both Russell and Strawson agreed that the descriptive content that something has to fit in order to be the thing picked out by a particular definite description, enters into the propositional content of sentences containing that description. Indeed, together with Frege, Carnap, Church, Searle, and many others, they thought that some such explanation has to hold virtually for any expression we classify as a singular term.

In the series of his papers written during 1960s and 1970s, Keith Donnellan – together with Ruth Barcan Marcus, Saul Kripke, Hilary Putnam, Tyler Burge, David Kaplan, and others – attacked the outlined explanation of the functioning of definite descriptions (and other singular terms), laying thereby the foundations for what subsequently become known as "the new theory of reference". The theory gradually became the prevailing way of thinking about reference, or at least the unavoidable challenge for its rivals. *Essays on Reference, Language, and Mind* for the first time collect Donnellan's seminal papers from that period. The seven papers collected in this book can roughly be divided thematically into three categories: those dealing with the referential/attributive distinction, those dealing with the historical explanation theory of reference, and those dealing with further consequences of such a theory.

In "Reference and Definite Descriptions", "Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again", and "Speaker Reference, Descriptions, and Anaphora", Donnellan introduces the referential/attributive distinction for definite descriptions, and defends it against MacKay's (1968) and (at least implicitly) Kripke's (1998) criticism. He argues that both Russell and Strawson – philosopher who proposed two dominant competing views on definite descriptions – neglected their important use, which he calls "the referential." The use of definite descriptions opposed to the referential one, Don-

nellan calls "the attributive," and initially explains the distinction in the following way (Donnellan 2012a: 7):

> A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so. A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an assertion, on the other hand, uses the description to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about and states something about that person or thing. In the first case the definite description might be said to occur essentially, for the speaker wishes to assert something about whatever or whoever fits that description; but in the referential use the definite description is merely one tool for doing a certain job – calling attention to a person or thing – and in general any other device for doing the same job, another description or a name, would do as well. In the attributive use, the attribute of being the so-and-so is all important, while it is not in the referential use.

Having established the distinction, Donnellan argues that whoever is right in the Russell-Strawson dispute, he can at best deal only with attributively used descriptions.

Although he never stated it explicitly in his 1966 paper, it seems clear that Donnellan took (or at least that he was committed to take) the referential use, and hence the referential/attributive distinction itself, as a semantically significant phenomenon. This may appear to be at odds with what he explicitly says about the distinction (Donnellan 2012a: 20–21):

> In general, whether or not a definite description is used referentially or attributively is a function of the speaker's intentions in a particular case. "The murderer of Smith" may be used either way in the sentence "The murderer of Smith is insane." It does not appear plausible to account for this, either, as an ambiguity in the sentence. […] it is not syntactically ambiguous. Nor does it seem at all attractive to suppose an ambiguity in the meaning of the words; it does not appear to be semantically ambiguous. (Perhaps we could say that the sentence is pragmatically ambiguous: the distinction between roles that the description plays is a function of the speaker's intentions.)

But the semantic significance thesis, I would say, is compatible with the quoted passage. Firstly, one should note that here Donnellan adopts one (today) passé semantics/pragmatics distinction, according to which virtually all the linguistic context dependent phenomena would count as merely the pragmatic ones. On that understanding, for example, indexicality would turn out to be a pragmatic phenomenon – the meaning (character) of e.g. "now" is constant, but its content may vary with context – although today it is standardly taken as a semantic one. Then it is compatible with what Donnellan says, to maintain that he takes the distinction as (according to the presently prevailing understanding) a semantic one. Secondly, as Bartolet (1980: 285) points out, Donnellan argues that adopting the

referential/attributive distinction has the following consequence (Donnel-lan 2012a: 20–21):

> It does not seem possible to say categorically of a definite description in a particular sentence that it is a referring expression […]. In general, whether or not a definite description is used referentially or attributively is a func-tion of the speaker's intentions in a particular case. […] This, I think, means that the view, for example, that sentences can be divided up into predicates, logical operators, and referring expressions is not generally true. In the case of definite descriptions one cannot always assign the referential function in isolation from a particular occasion on which it is used.

And this, according to Bartolet, "*is* a substantive semantic thesis, which if correct does have serious consequences for semantic theory". Finally, as some of commentators noted, Donnellan takes his referential/attributive distinction as an alternative of, or at least a supplement to Russell's theory of descriptions (or to Strawson's, who in turn took it as an alternative to Russell's). And Russell's theory *is* a semantic theory that provides an analy-sis of definite descriptions, and explicates the truth conditions of sentences containing definite descriptions by giving their logical form. Therefore, un-derstood as an alternative of, or a supplement to Russell's theory, Donnellan must have taken the distinction, then, as semantically significant.

Now, if the referential/attributive distinction is semantically signifi-cant, the choice whether in the particular utterance of the sentence "The *F* is *G*" the description is used referentially or attributively, must affect utterance's content and truth conditions. In the attributive case, the utter-ance will say something true only if there is a thing, *whatever it may be*, which is uniquely *F*, and which is *G*. But in the referential case, the utter-ance will say something true only if the particular thing the speaker has in mind in using "the *F*", is *G*. The thing that makes Donnellan's view here particularly controversial is the idea that the attribute, or the descriptive content of a definite description is not essential when it is used referen-tially, and that "it is quite possible for the correct identification to be made even though no one fits the description we used" (Donnellan 2012a: 9). In the above example, then, even if the man you are staring at is actually not drinking a martini, but water or vodka, you nevertheless said something true in uttering "The man drinking a martini is irritating" if you have used the definite description referentially, and if the person you had in mind, and to which you intend to refer with the description, really is irritating. In the referential case, as Donnellan says, the definite description is nothing but a tool for doing a certain job. With such characterisation of the refer-entially used descriptions, Donnellan in a sense echoes Mill's (1919: 20) well-known remark concerning proper names:

[…] a town may have been named Dartmouth, because it is situated at the mouth of the [river] Dart. But it is no part of the signification […] of the word Dartmouth, to be situated at the mouth of the Dart. If send should choke up the mouth of the river, or an earthquake change its course, and remove it to a distance from the town, the name of the town would not necessarily be changed. […] Proper names are attached to the objects themselves, and are not dependent on the continuance of any attribute of the object.

If Donnellan were right in distinguishing the two uses, characterising them the way he does, the consequences for the semantic would be enormous.

2

Ever since Donnellan introduced it, the referential/attributive distinction became a much-discussed issue in the philosophy of language, particularly regarding its semantic significance, as well as its adequate formulation and explanation. Donnellan's two subsequent papers – "Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again" and "Speaker Reference, Descriptions, and Anaphora" – were written as a reaction to Alfred MacKay's and (at least implicitly) Saul Kripke's criticism of the distinction, and as its novel support.

MacKay (1968) argues that on Donnellan's account, reference in a sense becomes too arbitrary, because referring now comes down to intending to refer, thus making the particular choice of the expression for that purpose, and so its conventional meaning, irrelevant. As such, MacKay argues, Donnellan's theory would hardly differ from the one implied by Humpty Dumpty (in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*), who, in response to Alice's complaint that "glory", contrary to what he says, does not mean *a nice knockdown argument*, says (quoted from MacKay 1968: 200):

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."

But is MacKay's objection to Donnellan justified? In his rejoinder, Donnellan (2012b: 39–43) persuasively argued that MacKay's point here is wrong. To say that speaker's intentions determine reference does not lead into a Humptydumptyan view. It is not as easy, Donnellan explains, to form intentions as the Humpty Dumpty episode and MacKay suggest. Speaker's ability to form a particular intention – in this case the intention to refer using the expression "*E*" to a particular thing *x* – depends on the situation

the speaker is in, and this includes speaker's expectations towards his au-
dience. So one cannot form the intention to refer to *x* using "the *F*", unless
she expects that her audience will be able to work out who or what she is
referring to. As Donnellan (2012b: 43) neatly remarks, demonstrating his
point, unlike Humpty Dumpty in the described episode,

> if I were to end this reply to MacKay with the sentence "There's glory for
> you" I would be guilty of arrogance and, no doubt, of overestimating the
> strength of what I have said, but given the background story I do not think I
> could be accused of saying something unintelligible.

Although MacKay's outlined objection to Donnellan was mistaken,
there is an important point in MacKay's paper – perhaps even more impor-
tant than the previous one – which Donnellan (2012b) did not answer. The
point is that one cannot *refer* with the expression "*E*" unless she strictly
obeys the conventional meaning of "*E*". You can have a thing in mind;
you can even have the intention to refer to that thing with "*E*"; the con-
ventional meaning of "*E*" might even make the use of "*E*" in that context
appropriate, e.g. because your audience falsely believes that the thing you
want refer to is *E* (see Donnellan 2012a: 13–14). But if that thing does not
fit its conventional meaning, it cannot be said that you have referred to
that thing using "*E*".

The disagreement between Donnellan and MacKay here would be
mostly verbal if it were merely whether one should say that *referring* is
only a kind of making it knowable what one is talking about, namely the
one where somebody is using an expression that fits the thing, or whether
one can say that one can *refer* to something with an expression even if that
something does not fit it. But the disagreement is more than that. MacKay
obviously assumes that only referring, as *he* understands it, unlike some
other kinds of making it knowable what one is talking about (including
Donnellan's referentially used descriptions), is semantically significant.
Donnellan, on the other hand, thinks either that referring comprises more
than, or that it is something completely different from referring as MacKay
understands it, and that such referring is of the semantic significance too.
This disagreement is a substantial one.

So even if MacKay would grant Donnellan's (2012b) rejoinder, the
latter challenge to Donnellan's view would persist. Indeed, it became the
standard complaint against the semantic significance of the referential/at-
tributive distinction, starting with Grice (1998) and Kripke (1980, 1998).
Kripke (1980: 25 n. 3), for example, notes that he is "tentatively inclined to
believe, in opposition to Donnellan, that his [Donnellan's] remarks about
reference have little to do with semantics or truth-conditions, though they
may be relevant to a theory of speech-acts". The common assumption

behind such complaints against Donnellan's distinction is that semantics takes as relevant only the conventional aspect of meaning, or at least that straightforwardly constrained by the conventional meaning, such as the content (referents) of indexicals. Then, all the phenomena departing from (in one way or another) such linguistic conventions cannot count as semantically significant. Donnellan's referentially used descriptions are precisely one such example, because whether the referent of "the *F*" fits its descriptive content or not is completely irrelevant for the reference, and the descriptive content of "the *F*" is its conventional meaning.

Kripke fully develops his criticism of Donnellan's distinction in "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference", and he writes this paper in the same period when Donnellan is writing "Speaker Reference, Descriptions, and Anaphora". In both of the papers the authors acknowledge the familiarity with the other one, if only through oral presentation (Donnellan 2012e: 146 n. 16, Kripke 1998: 249 n. 1). Donnellan's paper, then, can partly be taken as a reaction to Kripke's criticism. Mainly, however, it is a novel attempt to support the semantic significance of the referential/ attributive distinction, by showing that the concept of speaker reference – the essential element of his characterisation of the referential use – is semantically significant, and by showing how speaker reference makes referentially used descriptions work. Drawing on Charles Chastain's analysis of the so-called "anaphoric chains", Donnellan argues that such chains can contain referentially used definite descriptions, and that such descriptions can either determine semantic referents of further links in the chain (e.g. of pronouns), or that they themselves can inherit as their semantic referents a thing that is the speaker referent of the antecedent expression in the chain (Donnellan 2012e: 122ff.).

For example, when you utter "The man drinking a martini is irritating", referring with the definite description to a man at the party who is *not* drinking a martini, and your friend replies, "He is not drinking a martini, but he certainly is irritating", the pronoun "he" in his response semantically refers to the same man you referred to using "the man drinking a martini", and it refers to that man because it inherits him as the referent from the description you used referentially, not because it refers to that man as an indexical. And in the anaphoric chain "A man came to the office today. The man tried to sell me a book", "the man" picks out whomever "a man" picks out. But "a man", as an indefinite description, can pick someone out, and in that way provide the needed interpretation for "the man", only if the speaker has a particular person in mind in using "a man". Then that person is the speaker referent of "a man", and the semantic referent of "the man". Otherwise, "a man" would simply mean that there is *at least one* man, and as such it would not be compatible in

any way with "the man", which implies uniqueness. (Donnellan (2012e: 138ff.) goes even further with arguments based on anaphoric chains, but I will leave it at this point.)

Although it seems that Donnellan here provides an additional, a more compelling support for his (now explicitly stated) thesis that referentially used descriptions can be semantically significant, the proposed argument, as it turns out, shows less than Donnellan thought it does. As Kripke (1998: 254–255 n. 32) points out, Donnellan's examples involving anaphoric chains do not show that "Donnellan's distinction is itself a semantic one, though [they show that] it is relevant to semantics through pronominalization, as many other non-semantic properties are". On the other hand, Kripke (1998: 246–247) further argues, anaphoric phenomena can be used against Donnellan's view. For example, if Donnellan were right, then pronouns anaphorically linked to referentially used descriptions should always inherit their referents. This is certainly the case in the previously mentioned anaphoric example, where you comment, "The man drinking a martini is irritating", and your friend replies, "He is not drinking a martini, but he certainly is irritating". But now consider a similar example. You utter, "The man drinking a martini is irritating", referring, as before, with the definite description to a man at the party who is *not* drinking a martini, and your friend now replies, "No, he is not. The man you are referring to is not drinking a martini". Your friend replies the way he does because he knows that there is only one person drinking a martini at the party, and that she is anything but irritating.

This example is a problem for Donnellan's view because the pronoun "he" in your friend's reply is anaphorically linked to the description "the man drinking a martini" as you use it, and so, according to Donnellan, "he" should refer to the same thing you are referring to in using the description. But it obviously does not. Instead it picks out the only true martini drinker at the party, which means that, although you used it referentially, the description itself functions attributively, and only the latter is semantically significant. In his response to Kripke's criticism of Donnellan's distinction, Devitt (1981: 522) conceded that of all Kripke's arguments against the distinction, this one makes the strongest point. Interestingly, Devitt thinks that Kripke's argument affects his version of the referential/attributive distinction as well, but I think that it does not. If the argument is devastating at all, it is devastating only for views based on the idea that fitting the description is of no essence when the description is used referentially, as Donnellan originally thought. If a person has to fit the description "the man drinking a martini" in order to be its *referent*, as Devitt (1981, 2004) thinks it does, then if in uttering "The man drinking a martini is irritating" you semantically refer to someone, your utterance could not be correctly

followed by the response "No, he is not. The man you are referring to is not drinking a martini". More exactly, if in *such* case someone would respond "No, he is not …", she would necessarily say something false because "he" would inherit the (semantic) referent of "the man drinking a martini", and the semantic referent of that description has to fit it in order to be semantically significant. A thing cannot both be the semantic referent of a definite description and not fit its descriptive content.

Most subsequent philosophers discussing the referential/attributive distinction have agreed that, although Donnellan's original characterisation of the distinction helps to capture some pragmatic phenomena, such as the fact that we often misemploy (from the standpoint of their literal or conventional meaning) various expressions, and, nevertheless, thereby successfully communicate, the distinction as characterised by Donnellan lacks any straightforward semantic significance. A number of subsequent philosophers, however, argued that the distinction *would be* semantically significant once Donnellan's idea that the referent of a description does not have to fit its descriptive content would be abandoned. Wettstein (1998: 260 and 270) for example writes:

> Donnellan does himself a disservice in claiming that the referential-attributive distinction can best be brought only by considering cases in which the description fits nothing. These cases are controversial, but to rule against Donnellan with respect to them is not to rule against the referential-attributive distinction. […] We have, then, a general referential-attributive distinction of semantic significance. It is not quite the distinction that Donnellan originally formulated, for I have put to one side Donnellan's controversial view about reference via a conventionally inapplicable expression.

And Devitt (1981: 519) suggests virtually the same thing, as I already mentioned earlier:

> […] whether "*F*" applies to *x* is relevant to whether *x* is the semantic referent of "the *F*" (referential). What my stand on Donnellan's distinction rules as irrelevant to this question is whether "*F*" applies *uniquely* to, denotes, *x*. According to this assumption, then, the lover [in Donnellan's (2012a) referential example] is not the semantic referent of "her husband", even though he is linked to it by a d-chain [causal designating chain], because he is not *a* husband of the woman. A successful referential use requires application as well as designation.

If the suggested departure from Donnellan's original characterisation of the referential use is to be adopted, Wettstein and Devitt agree, referentially used descriptions would function more or less as complex demonstratives, such as "that man drinking a martini" or "this book". In this case, the descriptive content of referentially used descriptions would only

narrow down the extension of their potential semantic referents – it would be a necessary condition, which something has to satisfy in order to be the referent of a description – but the particular referent of the utterance of a referentially used description would (in most cases) still be picked out by speaker's intentions. I say "in most cases" because for complete definite descriptions apparently, speaker's intentions would be relevant only for determining their particular use – the attributive or the referential – but the referent or the denotation of such descriptions would be determined solely by their descriptive content; for a further discussion see Devitt (2004).

Now, the explanation that appeals to the analogy with complex demonstratives seems particularly compelling in the case of incomplete descriptions, namely definite descriptions such as "the book" or "the man drinking a martini", which, by themselves, pick out nothing uniquely. Some philosophers took incomplete descriptions as decisive evidence against Russell's analysis, and a firm support for Donnellan's distinction, but I would say that such descriptions are a motivation, rather than evidence (for a further discussion see section 4 below). Given all that, Devitt (2004: 296) concludes that referentially used descriptions, understood in the modified way, are weakly rigid. That is, if the referentially used description "the F" actually refers to the object x, then it refers to x in every possible world in which x is an F (of course "the F" can actually refer to x only if x is actually an F). Such understanding of referentially used descriptions, however, departs from the one adopted by the direct reference theorists, such as Wettstein, who insist that sentences containing such descriptions express singular propositions, and that referentially used descriptions are rigid just the way proper names are. Be that as it may, the issue about the referentially used descriptions remains an open challenge, and although Donnellan's original characterisations of referentially used descriptions, and his arguments supporting it, are not so much in the focus of the current discussions about the referentially used descriptions, they remain a persisting motivation for it.

3

Whatever the issue concerning the referentially used descriptions ultimately comes down to, in discussing them, Donnellan was among the first after Russell's introduction of names in the "strict logical sense", to bring the attention to the "direct reference" phenomenon in a language. Apparently, there are cases in which an expression refers to a thing, and contributes that thing, rather than a descriptive content (if there is any) associated with that expression, to the proposition expressed by the sentence in which that expression occurs. If such expressions (be they descriptions or something else) really exist, i.e. if reference does not (always) work

the way descriptivists think it works, the crucial question becomes, how do such expressions get to stand in the referential relation to things in the world? Donnellan's papers "Proper Names and Identifying Descriptions" and "Speaking of Nothing" provide an answer to it.

Donnellan (2012c) brings a number of arguments against descriptivism – or "the identifying descriptions view", as he calls it – as defended (in various forms) by Frege, Russell, Strawson, and Searle. According to descriptivists, the reference of an expression is always determined by expression's descriptive content. And it is this content, rather than the thing it picks out, that a referential expression contributes to the propositional content of a sentence it occurs within. On this view, then, the thing that the descriptive content picks out is the referent of the expression, relevant for the truth-value of what a sentence containing it says, but not for the truth conditions. Donnellan argues that such a model in many cases provides neither necessary, nor sufficient conditions for something to be the referent of an expression; if so, this affects the understanding of truth conditions as well. Referentially used descriptions are just one example of that: Although in "The man drinking a martini is irritating" the descriptive content of the definite description may pick out one thing, if you use the description referentially, you can make something else its referent, and say of *that* thing that it is irritating. Proper names and indexicals, Donnellan thinks, function in the same way. So it turns out that for all referential expressions, speaker's intentions and, more generally, the context of their use, ultimately determine their reference. Of course, as I noted in the previous section, in downgrading the role of descriptive content, Donnellan seems to go to far. And, what is interesting (and often neglected in discussions), he does not stop at definite descriptions. In fact, he argues that one and the same proper name can in different contexts refer to different things – and not only because the name is "ambiguous", as most names are, given that they have many bearers (see Donnellan 2012c: 68–71; the same phenomenon is discussed in Devitt 1981, Kripke 1980: 25 n. 3, 85 n. 36, and Kripke 1998: 237–238).

Most authors after Donnellan, who were generally sympathetic to his ideas concerning reference, agreed that for many referential expressions, most notably definite descriptions and indexicals, their descriptive content (what, following Kaplan, might be called "character"), *is* essential if their reference is to be taken as semantically relevant. The referent of such expressions has to fit their descriptive content in order to be semantically significant. For most referential expressions that have a descriptive content, however, that content provides only a necessary condition for something to be their referent (the pronoun "I" would be a notable exception here, and, perhaps, referentially used complete definite descriptions). But

although the descriptive content is essential for determining the referent of an expression (if, of course, the expression has such a content in the first place), it is the referent that enters into the propositional content of sentences containing the expression, not its descriptive content.

Donnellan (2012c) primarily concentrates on proper names, making the previously mentioned point by considering the counterexamples to descriptivism. For example, Donnellan argues, you and your community may have mostly false beliefs about a thing x, and know no true identifying description of it, yet you may successfully refer to x in using a proper name "N" if there is an *appropriate historical connection* linking your use of "N" with x. It is this historical connection, rather than any descriptive content associated with "N", that determines its reference, i.e. picks out its referent. And even if there were a thing y, which fits all the identifying descriptions you associate with "N", it would still not be its referent, unless there was an appropriate historical connection linking it with "N". Moreover, there are cases where one can associate barely any information with "N", true or false, but she, nevertheless, successfully refer with it. I will mention just two examples that demonstrate these points (Donnellan 2012c: 59–60, 71–73). In the first example, a child meets Tom – a friend of her parents – and all she remembers afterwards is that his name was "Tom". Later on, when the child asks "Is Tom coming for lunch?", she asks a question about Tom. And so the child refers to Tom using the name "Tom", although she associates no identifying description with it. In the second example, we can imagine that all the identifying descriptions we associate with the name "Thales" do not pick out the philosopher who is historically appropriately connected to our use of that name, and about whom Aristotle and Herodotus wrote. Nevertheless, that philosopher is the referent of "Thales" as we use it. Indeed, even if there were another person fitting all the descriptions we associate with "Thales", but which is not historically connected with "Thales" as we use it, that person would not be its referent.

As it turns out, then, there are numerous counterexamples to the descriptivist view, and the view loses even more of its plausibility once it is realised that there is an alternative explanation of how the reference works at our disposal. Donnellan's conclusion here is much the same as Kripke's (1980). Indeed, many of his counterexamples make the same points Kripke's counterexamples do. (He admits Kripke's partial influence on him, but, unlike Kripke, Donnellan in his argumentation never used the modal apparatus.) And his historical explanation theory closely resembles Kripke's causal theory of reference, although Donnellan emphasises that his historical explanation of reference should not be identified with the causal theory, because not all elements of the historical explanation need to be causal (Donnellan 2012d: 81 n. 3). It is hard, however, to say

what exactly Donnellan means here, since the only non-causal element in the historical connection could be a descriptive one, and this is surely something we do not want to have in the theory opposing descriptivism. Furthermore, Donnellan's (2012c, 2012d) historical explanation theory is much less worked out than Kripke's (1980) causal explanation. Many important points, such as how the reference of names is fixed in the first place, or what makes a historical connection the appropriate one, are left with no positive explanation.

In discarding descriptivism, and proposing an alternative explanation of how the reference works, Donnellan (unlike Kripke) embraced the direct reference theory: it is the referent of the expression "*E*" that enters into the propositional content of sentences containing "*E*". This view, of course, faces the well-known puzzles, which initially motivated Frege, Russell, and others, to adopt a descriptivist explanation as a way out. Donnellan (2012d) addresses one of these puzzles – the problem of the reference to non-existent – focusing in particular on the case of negative existential sentences, such as "Santa Clause does not exist". Here the main question is, how can such sentences be not just meaningful, but say something true as well? Generally, if the sentence says something true, it is because it expresses a true proposition. And when sentences contain proper names, or other directly referring expressions, they express *singular* propositions – structured entities composed of objects (referents), properties, and relations (the latter two correspond to predicative elements of sentences). And relative to this explanation the problem comes: What do meaningful sentences such as "Superman flies" express; or even worse, what do true sentences, such as "Superman does not exist", express?

Although he is not decisive on the matter, Donnellan (2012d: 101) suggests that predicative sentences containing fictional expressions, such as "Superman flies" or "Sherlock Holmes is a British detective", express *no* proposition. Now, even if that would solve the problem with such predicative sentences, it would not help with the negative existential ones. That is, if a sentence does not express a proposition, it cannot say anything true. It does not seem preposterous to say that "Superman flies" says nothing true, and this might be explained by saying that it expresses no proposition. But unlike such predicative sentences, the negative existential ones, such as "Superman does not exist", in fact say something true, and that something must be a proposition. Indeed, since the mentioned sentence contains the proper name "Superman", the proposition it expresses should be singular. As such, the proposition should contain the referent of "Superman". But such a referent does not exist. Thus a problem emerges.

Donnellan attempts to solve the problem with empty names by introducing the concept of *block*. The block is an event in the historical expla-

nation of the use of a name that precludes – blocks – the identification of *any* referent (Donnellan 2012d: 104). It is an event in the history when a fictional name was introduced into the discourse about reality *as if it is a name of an actual object*. The block now helps one to explain the problematic predicative sentences. "Superman flies" expresses no proposition because our relevant use of "Superman" here ends in a block that prevents attaching any referent to that name, and so there is nothing the name could contribute to sentence's content. (I say "relevant use" because "Superman" could obviously be used as the name of someone's parrot pet, and in *that* case "Superman flies" would say something true, and would express a singular proposition.)

But how can the block help one to deal with the negative existential sentences? He suggests that the problem can be solved once we separate propositions expressed with such sentences from sentences' truth conditions. Donnellan does not say what propositions would then the negative existential sentences express, but proposes the following metalinguistic truth conditions for such sentences: If the proper name "*N*" is part of the discourse about reality, the sentence "*N* does not exist" is true iff (the relevant) uses of "*N*" end in a block. Take "Santa Claus does not exist" as an example. Whatever the proposition it expresses, the sentence is true because every relevant use of "Santa Claus" in predicative sentences ends in a block, most likely in a fictional story about Santa Claus that parents have presented to a child as factual. The proposal is, of course, more than sketchy, and to make it plausible, one would have to provide a lot of additional explanations.

4

I will briefly mention some problems I see with Donnellan's proposed solution to the puzzle concerning reference to non-existent. Firstly, it seems that the analogous analysis of truth conditions for negative existential sentences should hold for "positive" existential sentences, such as "Donnellan exists". But it is much less compelling to attach metalinguistic truth conditions to existential sentences containing names that have referents, than to existential sentences containing names without referents. What is more, Donnellan apparently holds that truth conditions should be separated from propositions not only in the case of the existential sentences, but in general. He (2012d: 110) writes:

> If you say "Henry is bald" and I say "George is bald" we express the same proposition if the person you referred to by using the name "Henry" and I by using the name "George" are the same person. But what you say is true if and

only if the person you referred to – that is, the person historically connected – when you used the name "Henry" has the property of being bold; whereas what I say is true if and only if what I referred to by using the name "George" has the property of being bald. The truth conditions are different because they must be stated in terms of what is referred to by different expressions, in the one case my use of the name "George" and in the other your use of the name "Henry". Yet we may express the same proposition.

This passage seems problematic for several reasons. For one thing, if one has a semantic theory committed to propositions – as Donnellan does – in that theory, then, sentences have truth conditions and truth-values only insofar as they express certain propositions from which they inherit these features. Propositions, on the other hand, are primary truth-values bearers, and they alone determine truth conditions. If so, it makes no sense to talk about truth conditions of a sentence independently of the proposition it expresses, because it is the proposition that determines such conditions. The situation is, of course, different in semantic theories, such as Davidson's truth-conditional semantics, in which one operates only with sentences (relativized to context, or with utterances). But this is so only because such theories do not operate with propositions. As for Donnellan's account, I do not see what good can ultimately come out of the theory that accepts propositions, but separates them from truth conditions. This seems to be *ad hoc* move, just to save the theory, lacking any independent motivation or support. (To that, separating propositions from truth conditions would force one either to deny that propositions are truth bearers, or to accept that two sets of truth conditions are associated with each sentence that expresses a proposition, namely the truth conditions of the sentence, and the truth conditions of the proposition it expresses. But in the latter case, how are these two to be related?)

If one wants to solve the puzzle in the way Donnellan does, perhaps a better strategy would be, instead of separating truth conditions from propositions, to adopt metalinguistic propositions – thereby building the metalinguistic truth conditions into the propositional content itself – and then try to support the thesis that some or all sentences containing proper names express such propositions. A number of authors tried to solve the puzzles about reference, such as the substitutivity puzzle, or Frege's identity puzzle, and more generally the problem of the meaning of proper names, by appealing to metalinguistic content (see e.g. Bach 1004). Such attempts, however, quickly end up in counterintuitive analyses. So there is an important distinction, which, I think, should be preserved on any semantic account involving propositions. One should clearly distinguish two sets of conditions: (*i*) conditions under which a sentence would express a true proposition, and (*ii*) conditions under which a proposition

would be true. Only the latter are *the* truth conditions. The former are merely a metalinguistic description, which does not enter, for that matter, into the propositional content of the given sentence. The difference between the two becomes obvious once they are placed into the modal settings. A proposition, at least on the traditional understanding, would have truth conditions, and could be true, even if no language would exist, and it would have the same truth conditions relative to different languages. This apparently cannot hold for the metalinguistic description.

In the last two papers of the *Essays* – "The Contingent 'A Priori' and Rigid Designation" and "Kripke and Putnam on Natural Kind Terms" – Donnellan discusses further consequences of the new theory of reference, at least as understood by Kripke and Putnam. The first consequence is Kripke's (1980) idea that definite descriptions can be used merely to fix the reference of a proper name, without giving it at the same time the meaning. The second consequence is the extension of the theory to natural kind terms and substance terms, such as "cat" or "water", developed by Kripke (1980) and Putnam.

I will end the paper with two quick remarks; the first one concerns a point Donnellan makes in his "Introduction" in the book, and the second one publisher's blurb.

In his brief "Introduction" to the collection, reflecting on the referential/attributive distinction Donnellan (2012f: xvi), writes:

> I should have supplemented the [2012a] paper on definite descriptions, I now believe, by pointing to some features of the situations involving referential definite descriptions that give reason to think that the sentence uttered cannot be analyzed via Russell's theory of descriptions […]. This would have blocked any suggestion [e.g. Kripke's] that while the sentence uttered may be analyzed as Russell proposed, some other feature of the situation gives rise to our intuition that reference is going on. Here I will point to two such characteristics that seem to argue against treating the sentence according to Russell's theory.

Now, the features or characteristics he has in mind here are (*i*) that most definite descriptions we actually use are *incomplete* descriptions, i.e. definite descriptions that by themselves uniquely pick out nothing, and (*ii*) that when descriptions are used referentially in a sentence, speakers consider the denotation of the description (provided it differs from the thing referred to by the description) as irrelevant for the truth of what the sentence in the context says.

As for the latter feature, it is not really clear why Donnellan *now* thinks that such cases would make any substantial difference if he were to point them out in his "Reference and Definite Descriptions". True, all the

cases he considered then were the cases where *nothing* fits the descriptive content. But I think that it is a trivial extension of what he says about such cases to say that the same would hold if there was something else, to which the speaker does not intend to refer, but that fits the descriptive content. How would examples where the speaker refers using "the *F*" to *x* – which is not an *F* – and where there is some other *y*, to which the speaker does not refer, but which is the *F*, make a better case for the referential/attributive distinction than Donnellan's original cases? What is important is that in *all* these examples the actual referent of a description would not fit its descriptive content. MacKay, Grice, Kripke, and others, attacked precisely that feature of Donnellan's referentially used descriptions, and even the later sympathizers of the referential/attributive distinction, such as Devitt and Wettstein, abandoned it. Thus it is far from clear how could emphasise of this feature *now* help Donnellan to block the standard complain against the referential/attributive distinction as he understood it.

As for the other feature Donnellan mentions – the incompleteness of definite descriptions – he thinks that it would help him to support his view because Russell's analysis cannot adequately deal with such descriptions. He comes to this conclusion now because he assumes that the only thing a proponent of Russell's analysis could do in this case is to try to find an additional descriptive material in the context of use, and in that way transform an incomplete description into a complete one that uniquely denotes a thing. But as Donnellan, following Wettstein (1998), notes, it is often in principle impossible to find the suitable descriptive material that would adequately make an incomplete description complete. If that is the whole story, then the proponents of Russell's analysis seem to have a serious problem, unless they are happy to conclude, as Bach (1994: 103–104) is, that sentences containing incomplete descriptions are literarily false, although they can pragmatically convey true propositions.

Things, however, complicate (see Devitt 2004 for a detailed discussion). On the one hand, even if we adopt Donnellan's distinction, it is clear that attributively used descriptions could be incomplete. Thus the proponents of Donnellan's view face the same problem the proponents of Russell's view face. If so, it seems that the problem of incompleteness could hardly be taken as something supporting Donnellan's view rather than Russell's. On the other hand, the strategy of trying to extract an additional descriptive material from the context of use is not the only solution available to the proponents of Russell's view. Another possible solution, proposed by a number of philosophers, would be to say that incomplete descriptions are an example of restricted quantification. Then the solution to the problem of incompleteness would be not to provide an additional descriptive material, but rather to restrict the domain of quantification,

making an incomplete description complete relative to the restricted domain. The whole issue of incomplete descriptions is, of course, fairly complicated. Nevertheless, it seems to me clear that incomplete descriptions themselves provide a weak (if any) support for Donnellan's view.

The final (minor) remark: At the dust cover of Donnellan's book there is a brief blurb, written probably by the publisher, saying among other things that Donnellan's 1966 paper "Reference and Definite Descriptions" is "historically the first move in the direct reference direction". This remark seems to me false. If one would have to detect the first move in the direct reference direction, it would more likely be Ruth Barcan Marcus' 1961 paper "Modalities and Intensional Languages", which exhibits a clear departure from descriptivism, and move towards the direct reference view on proper names. Marcus (1961: 309–310) for example writes:

> But to give a thing a proper name is different from giving a unique description. […] suppose we randomized as many whole numbers as we needed for a one-to-one correspondence, and thereby tagged each thing. This identifying tag is a proper name of the thing. In taking our inventory we discovered that many of the entities countenanced as things by that language-culture complex already had proper names, although in many cases a singular description may have been used. This tag, a proper name, has no meaning. It simply tags. It is not strongly equatable with any of the singular descriptions of the thing […] my point is only to distinguish tagging from describing, proper names from descriptions.

True, Marcus does not say *how* such simply tagging names succeed in doing what they do. She does not suggest a particular mechanism of reference, alternative to the descriptivist one. But neither does Donnellan until his 1970 paper "Proper Names and Identifying Descriptions". (For the further discussion about this historical matters see papers collected in Humphreys and Fetzer 1998.)

In conclusion, I would say that the value of Donnellan's collection does not lie in its gathering of his up to now hard to find, or less known papers. Many of the papers reprinted here became the standard furniture of philosophy of language readers, and all of them are by now classics of contemporary philosophy of language. The value of the collection lies rather in the fact that all these papers are for the first time collected in a single book, making it easier to see the bigger picture, the broader project, behind each of them. What is missing in this collection, it seems to me, is Donnellan's more exhaustive overview or introduction, offering a fresh look at, and elaboration of the ideas he developed a few decades ago, and which caused so much subsequent discussions and developments. In his

"Introduction", Donnellan barely touches the subsequent developments of the referential/attributive idea, and he says nothing about subsequent development concerning the historical explanation theory and the direct reference theory, and how his views relate to them. Nevertheless, the very fact that all these important papers are now collected in the single book makes it worth of existence and possession. *Essays on Reference, Language, and Mind* are likely to became the standard, easy to track down reference book for every future work dealing with Donnellan's ideas, as well as with a number of issues he initiated half a century ago.

References

Bach, K. 1994 [1989]. *Thought and Reference* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press).

Bartolet, R. 1980. "The Semantic Significance of Donnellan's Distinction", *Philosophical Studies* 37, 281–288.

Devitt, M. 1981. "Donnellan's Distinction", in P. A. French, T. E. Uehling, Jr., and H. K. Wettstein (eds.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy VI: The Foundations of Analytic Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 511–524.

——. 2004. "The Case for Referential Descriptions", in M. Reimer and A. Bezuidenhout (eds.), *Descriptions and Beyond* (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press), 280–305.

Donnellan, K. 2012a [1966]. "Reference and Definite Descriptions", in Donnellan (2012g: 3–30).

——. 2012b [1968]. "Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again", in Donnellan (2012g: 31–47).

——. 2012c [1970]. "Proper Names and Identifying Descriptions", in Donnellan (2012g: 49–79).

——. 2012d [1974]. "Speaking of Nothing", in Donnellan (2012g: 81–114).

——. 2012e [1978]. "Speaker Reference, Descriptions, and Anaphora", in Donnellan (2012g: 115–146).

——. 2012f. "Introduction", in Donnellan (2012g: xiii–xx).

——. 2012g. *Essays on Reference, Language, and Mind*, J. Almog and P. Leonardi (eds.) (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press).

Grice, P. 1998 [1969]. "Vacuous Names" (an excerpt), in Ostertag (1998: 195–200).

Humphreys, P. W. and J. H. Fetzer (eds.). 1998. *The New Theory of Reference: Kripke, Marcus, and Its Origins* (Dordrecht etc.: Kluwer Academic Publishers).

Kripke, S. A. 1980 [1972]. *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

——. 2011 [1977]. "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference", in Ostertag (1998: 225–256).

MacKay, A. F. 1968. "Mr. Donnellan and Humpty Dumpty on Referring", *The Philosophical Review* 77, 197–202.

Marcus, R. B. 1961. "Modalities and Intensional Languages", *Synthese* 13, 303–322.

Mill, J. S. 1919 [1843]. *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive, Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation* (London and new York: Longmans Green, and co.).

Ostertag, G. (ed.). 1998. *Definite Descriptions: A Reader* (Cambridge, MA and London: A Bradford Book – The MIT Press).

Russell, B. 1998 [1905]. "On Denoting", in Ostertag (1998: 35–49).

Strawson, P. F. 1998 [1950]. "On Referring", in Ostertag (1998: 135–160).

Wettstein, H. 1998 [1981]. "Demonstrative Reference and Definite Descriptions", in Ostertag (1998: 257–273).