

Donnellan

(vs. Russell and Strawson)

Definite descriptions:
attributive and referential




Russell's view (and why Donnellan dislikes it)

- Russell claims: “if ‘C’ is a denoting phrase [as definite descriptions are by definition], it may happen that there is one entity x (there cannot be more than one) for which the proposition ‘ x is identical with C ’ is true... We may then say that the entity x is the denotation of the phrase ‘ C .’”

[“That coffee cup” = C ; the cup itself = x]

- Donnellan argues that there is an alternative to this
- This alternative – the “referential use” – demonstrates a different use of definite descriptions



“Attributive use” vs. “referential use”

- Two uses of definite descriptions according to Donnellan
- *“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...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” (285).*

“Smith’s murderer is insane.”

Situation 1: We stumble upon Smith “foully murdered” and, because, as Donnellan points out, Smith was such a great guy, someone says, “*Smith’s murderer is insane.*”



holding that example in mind...

Situation 2: We are at the trial of Jones, who has been accused of the murder and he is acting bizarrely on the stand. Someone points out: “*Smith’s murderer is insane.*”



...What is the distinction between these cases?

Situation 2 – In the courtroom

Let's say that Smith actually committed suicide. Where does that leave us?

- “In both cases we have used the predicate “is insane,” but in the first case, if there is no murderer, there is no person of whom it could be correctly said that we attributed insanity to him” (286). (*ATTRIBUTIVE USE*)
- However, in the *second* case, “the definite description is simply a means of identifying the person we want to talk about [and] it is quite possible for the correct identification to be made *even though no one fits the description we used*” (286; emphasis mine). (*REFERENTIAL USE*)



“Who is the man drinking a martini?”



Two situations:

- One is at a party and points out a person holding a martini glass using the above question – in actuality, however, the man is not drinking a martini, but rather has water in a martini glass
- One is at an AA party and informs a fellow member that someone is drinking a martini – the member responds with the above question



Again, these situations can be distinguished using Donnellan’s “attributive use” and “referential use” distinction

Is the difference between uses the beliefs of the speaker?

- “It is possible for a definite description to be used attributively even though the speaker (and his audience) believes that a certain person or thing fits the description...[a]nd it is possible for a definite description to be used referentially where the speaker believes that nothing fits the description” (290).
- Looking back to Smith’s murder...
- New example with the “king,” whom I believe to be a usurper of the throne

