

ATTRIBUTIVE, REFERENTIAL, *DE DICTO* AND *DE RE*

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December 2000

Keith Donnellan (1966) pointed out that a description like *Smith's murderer* in (1) has two uses.

(1) Smith's murderer is insane.

A speaker using it attributively predicates insanity of whoever murdered Smith. On the referential use the speaker predicates insanity of a particular individual, and the description is just a device for getting the addressee to recognize which one it is.

Kripke (1977) argued (though with a good deal of ambivalence) that Donnellan's distinction has no SEMANTIC relevance. His main arguments were directed at establishing that what Donnellan called the referential use of descriptions was actually nothing more than a speaker's wishing to convey something about a particular entity, a purely pragmatic phenomenon. Wilson (1991) has responded convincingly to most of Kripke's arguments. One exception is the topic of this paper.

In the course of his preliminary discussion, 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). The following section of his paper was an attempt to counter these ideas. I argue here 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.¹

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* 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, emphasis in original). 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 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.

¹ Kripke's arguments on this score are sometimes cited approvingly (cf. e.g. Ludlow & Neale (1991, 185), Ostertag (1998, 32, n.26)), but to my knowledge have never been challenged.

The third prong of Kripke's attack was more general. On Russell's view, 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. (2) illustrates this effect.

(2) The oracle predicted that Oedipus would want to marry his mother.

The three Russellian analyses of (2) are crudely indicated in (2a) – (2c).

- (2) 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 (2a), 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 (2b), 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 (2c).

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; emphasis in original, irrelevant footnote omitted).

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 is no bar to 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 see 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.²

Kripke's observations concerning the possible cooccurrences of readings follow naturally on this view. As he noted, when an intensional sentence is interpreted *de dicto*, there is no reference to any entity, so 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. Either their conception is referential (they have a *de re* thought), and so they attribute to the other person a *de re* attitude about a particular entity, or 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 *Oedipus will want to marry his mother*, these three possibilities correspond to the three readings of (2). (Of course when (2) itself is asserted on the widest scope reading ((2b)), 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. What we want is an analysis according to which (i) the attributive use of a description results in the expression of the type of proposition toward

² For arguments in favor of *de re* thought, see Burge 1977. I assume that it is not controversial that we have *de dicto* thoughts.

which an attitude is ascribed in the *de dicto* interpretation of a propositional attitude sentence, and (ii) the referential use expresses a *de re* type of proposition. For the former Russell's analysis suffices. For the latter Kaplan (1978) gives an analysis on which referentially used definite descriptions are rigid designators, like demonstratives.

Interestingly, Kripke mentioned this kind of approach but objected that 'a rigid definite description [so defined] still determines its referent via its unique satisfaction of the associated property – and this fact separates the notion of such a description from that of a referential description, as Donnellan defines it' (1977, 260). However, as Wettstein (1981) stressed, we may jettison that aspect of Donnellan's theory which claims that speaker intentions supercede descriptive content in determining reference on the referential use, while retaining the essence of his distinction. (Of course speaker intentions still determine whether an utterance of a description is meant attributively or referentially.) Alternatively, the approach formalized by Larson & Segal (1995) ratifies Donnellan's view on the role of speaker intentions in determining referential reference. Their approach is like Kaplan's in seeing referentially used descriptions as similar to demonstratives, but the content of the description need not be satisfied by the intended referent in order for reference to succeed. Deciding which of these options is correct goes beyond the scope of this paper.³

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³ [Acknowledgements]