

# Comments on “Reference and definite descriptions” by Keith S. Donnellan

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## Introduction

This essay aims to analyse the distinction made by Keith S. Donnellan between a referential and an attributive use of definite descriptions (dds). My intention is not to question whether this distinction holds but, accepting it as a hypothesis, to understand whether Donnellan's characterisation of each of these two uses is correct. The argument I want to make is that this is not the case.

## 1. Donnellan's distinction

First of all, we should briefly recall what Donnellan says. His starting point is precisely the distinction between two possible uses of a dd: a referential use and an attributive use.

By referentially using a dd, we indicate which is the object we are talking about. We are not really interested in the thing's propriety of being the so-and-so, in its possession of that particular attribute with which our description connotes it. It makes no difference which dd (or even proper name) we use as long as it succeeds in the task of effectively identifying the subject we are interested in. Instead, using a dd in an attributive way, we are no longer identifying some particular object we have in mind, but we are referring to any object that meets our description. The attribute of being the so-and-so is here fundamental.

From this characterisation of the two uses of dds follows a critical difference. For a referentially used dd to achieve its purpose is sufficient that it successfully identifies whom it has to identify. It does not matter whether the person/object we intend to refer to with the dd actually meets our description or not as long as we can indicate it efficiently to our interlocutor. We will have made a statement/question/order about a person/thing even if there is nothing that meets our description. That assertion may well be true, that question may be answered, and that order may be executed. All of this does not instead apply to the dds used attributively. In this case we are interested in the being the so-and-so of the thing and, if there is nothing that satisfies our description, our aim will not be achievable.

I interrupt here my summary of Donnellan's points, as the observations I intend to make concern only the ones dealt with so far. So, I begin my analysis dividing it into two parts: one focused on the referential use of dds and one on their attributive use.

## 2. Referential use

[...] 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.

DONNELLAN, 1966, p.285

Although this characterisation of referential use may seem intuitively correct, I do not agree with it. More precisely, I do not agree with the absolute irrelevance that Donnellan gives to the attribute of being the so-and-so expressed by the description.

Let's assume that two killers, Jack and Ed, are walking away from the crime scene after a murder. It is midnight and there is no one around except for a man, who pulls out his phone to make a call just as the two pass by. Jack notices him and, with his experience, immediately realises that he is a plainclothes cop. For sure, he is now calling for backup. Jack, therefore, turns to Ed, whispering: "That cop just made a phone call. We gotta run". Ed looks around. There's no one there but that man: it must be him whom Jack is referring to.

The dd 'that cop' referentially used by Jack was effective. It allowed Ed to figure out whom Jack was talking about. Still, there is more to it. Unlike Jack, Ed had not realised the man was a cop. The dd 'that cop' gave Ed an essential piece of information, perhaps even more important than what is claimed about his referent (that he made a call). Indeed, we can ask ourselves: what interest would the statement have been of if the dd had been another one? If Jack had said "That man just made a phone call", Ed would have still successfully identified the person to whom the allegation refers, but he would not have grasped the danger of the situation. Moreover, it would not be understood how that statement logically leads to say "We gotta run". The very logic of Jack's words would be lost.

I believe the example provided and the related considerations clearly show that the attribute of being the so-and-so can sometimes have considerable importance even in the referential use of dds. Using one description rather than another, the statements obtained will not always be interchangeable.

The whole argument made by Donnellan around the referential use is based on the importance of the communicative function of language: as long as we understand each other, any description or name is equally good. The problem is that using 'That man' instead of 'That cop' Jack and Ed still understand each other on the subject of the statement, but communication essentially fails as Ed does not understand the true sense of Jack's words. So, exactly where Donnellan thinks he's preserving the communicative role of language, he actually risks putting it in crisis.

But let's take a closer look at the proposed example. How does it differ from Donnellan's? Why does Donnellan's point not seem to work? The key is that in the description 'That cop' our subject is over-determined. More is being told than what is enough to detect him. To identify the subject, since there was no one around but a single person, it was enough to say "That man". And, indeed, it is this description that Ed implicitly grasps in 'That cop' and uses to successfully identify the subject of Jack's assertion. However, 'That cop' says more than 'That man': we could read it as 'That man who is a cop'.

Imagine we are surrounded by people. There is only one cop and we say 'That cop'. In this case, to identify him, every part of our description is needed: 'That man' would not point to anyone specific, while 'That man who is a cop' would lead us to our subject. In Jack and Ed's case, however, 'That man' is already pointing effectively to our subject. Therefore, by saying 'That cop' (which implicitly stands for 'That man who is a cop'), Jack is already making an assertion. Jack is saying that man is a cop. In this sense, if the man turned out not to be a cop, Ed would still recognise that Jack told him something true (that the man made a phone call), but would also accuse him of suggesting something false (that the man was a cop). This can be taken even further: the man is not a cop and Jack does not think he is, but, as a sadistic joke, he decides to tell Ed "That cop just made a phone call". Ed panics until Jack admits he was joking. I think Ed would accuse Jack of telling him something false rather

than something true as Donnellan would claim instead. Even Jack himself, admitting it was a joke, would acknowledge the falsity of his statement.

Let's recall Donnellan's thesis. For Donnellan, in the referential use of dds the attribute of being the so-and-so is not important, so much so that one description could be used indifferently rather than another as long as who is the subject is clear to the interlocutor. All this comes from saying that «in the referential use the definite description is merely one tool for doing a certain job - calling attention to a person or thing»<sup>1</sup>. That 'merely' is fundamental. It is precisely that 'merely' that the example of Jack and Ed's case calls into question. The description was not merely an instrument to draw attention to the subject in question; it also did something else, giving Ed a piece of information he previously did not have.

### 3. Attributive use

I want now to move on to the analysis of what Donnellan says about the attributive use of dds.

[...] if nothing fits the description the linguistic purpose of the speech act will be thwarted. That is, the speaker will not succeed in saying something true, if he makes an assertion; he will not succeed in asking a question that can be answered, if he has asked a question; he will not succeed in issuing an order that can be obeyed, if he has issued an order.

DONNELLAN, 1966, pp.291-292.

With regard to referential use, I argued that the attribute of being the so-and-so is more important than what Donnellan claims. Here I shall argue precisely the opposite about the attributive use. Contrary to what Donnellan says, the attributive use is not always doomed to fail if the entity corresponding to the description is missing.

In support of his thesis, Donnellan presents three examples: in the first, an attributively used dd appears in an assertion, in the second in an order, and in the third in a question. What I want to do is to show how, once particular conditions are given, these examples can put in check exactly the considerations Donnellan makes on their basis.

Donnellan starts by considering the hypothetical case of Smith's murder. Seeing Smith's brutalised body, we say, "Smith's murderer is insane". Using the expression 'Smith's murderer', we do not have anyone in mind, but we speak of whoever has the characteristic in question, that is, being the murderer of Smith. The dd is used attributively. Donnellan wonders: if there was no killer, who would we be calling insane? Clearly, nobody. Our assertion would therefore be false or devoid of any truth value. But let us assume a particular case. Jack wants to kill Smith, so he breaks into his house at night. He heads for the bedroom, where he finds his target asleep. He stabs him with a fury that clearly suggests insanity. The twist, however, is that Smith was not asleep when Jack arrived but already dead, deceased in his sleep a few hours earlier from a heart attack. Jack cannot then be described as Smith's murderer. Indeed, there is no murder. Yet, when on the basis of the numerous knife marks on the victim's body we say "Smith's murderer is insane", I believe that our assertion is still relative to someone - Jack - despite there being no one who can satisfy our description.

Consider now the second example made by Donnellan: «[...] imagine we are told that someone has laid a book on our prize antique table, where nothing should be put»<sup>2</sup>. In the order "Bring me the book on the table", 'the book on the table' is an attributively used dd:

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<sup>1</sup> Donnellan, 1966, p.285

<sup>2</sup> Donnellan, 1966, p.288

what interests us is the attribute of being the so-and-so. Therefore, according to Donnellan, the order cannot be satisfied if there is no book on the table. Again, I disagree with Donnellan. If, for example, there was a notebook on the table instead of a book, it is clear that it is that notebook that we want to be brought to us. What really interests us is not that there is **a book** on the table, but that there is something on the table, no matter what, when nothing should be there. Even if the description is not fully satisfied, our order can still be executed. Would taking the notebook satisfy our order? Clearly. Should the notebook be left on the table? Clearly not. One must not take the dd literally but grasp the intention behind the words.

Finally, I want to recall Donnellan's example of the man who drinks a martini.

Suppose one is at a party and, seeing an interesting-looking person holding a martini glass, one asks, "Who is the man drinking a martini?" If it should turn out that there is only water in the glass, one has nevertheless asked a question about a particular person, a question that it is possible for someone to answer. Contrast this with the use of the same question by the chairman of the local Teetotalers Union. He has just been informed that a man is drinking a martini at their annual party. He responds by asking his informant, "Who is the man drinking a martini?" In asking the question the chairman does not have some particular person in mind about whom he asks the question; if no one is drinking a martini, if the information is wrong, no person can be singled out as the person about whom the question was asked. Unlike the first case, the attribute of being the man drinking a martini is all-important, because if it is the attribute of no one, the chairman's question has no straightforward answer

DONNELLAN, 1966, p.287

For Donnellan, if the chairman of the local Teetotalers Union asks the question, it is essential that there is someone who is drinking a Martini for an answer to be possible. I disagree. Surely, it is important that the man is drinking a Martini rather than water, but it is not important that he is drinking a Martini instead of vodka. What worries the chairman is that someone is drinking alcohol, whether it is a Martini, a Mojito, absinthe or vodka. We are able to grasp that and we would indicate the man to the chairman whatever his drink. Maybe, we would add "He is not drinking a Martini, but vodka", but I doubt that the chairman would be very interested in this clarification. Saying instead "Your question has no answer. No one is drinking a martini" would be obviously wrong, as it would give the chairman the false perception of there being nothing to worry about.

From all the examples discussed, it clearly emerges that in the attributive use it is not necessary that the object in question meets our description perfectly. It is sufficient that the description gives a rough idea of what attributes the item in question should have: an idea precise enough to refer only to a single object (otherwise we would no longer be working with dds), but which also has a vagueness that is always present in ordinary language.

## **Conclusion**

Through the remarks I have made, I do not intend to take a side against Donnellan. I think that the problems I highlighted in his theory are not big enough to compromise it severely, nor was that my intent. However, I believe they should be taken into account. Indeed, my examples present by no means extreme, unrealistic or particularly rare cases. I, therefore, believe that those who still want to support Donnellan's theory should attempt to correct it with due adjustments and clarifications.

**Bibliography**

Donnellan, K. S. (1966) *Reference and Definite Descriptions*, *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 75, No. 3, pp. 281-304.