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CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE AND THE REFERENTIAL USE OF DESCRIPTIONS

ABSTRACT. This paper enters the continuing fray over the semantic significance of Donnellan's referential/attributive distinction. Some hold that the distinction is at bottom a pragmatic one: i.e., that the difference between the referential use and the attributive use arises at the level of speaker's meaning rather the level of sentence- or utterance-meaning. This view has recently been challenged by Marga Reimer and Michael Devitt, both of whom argue that the fact that descriptions are *regularly*, that is *standardly*, used to refer defeats the pragmatic approach. The present paper examines a variety of issues bearing on the regularity in question: whether the regularity would arise in a Russellian language, whether the regularity is similar to the standard use of complex demonstratives, and whether the pragmatic approach founders on the problem of dead metaphors. I argue that the pragmatic approach can readily explain all of these facets of the referential use of descriptions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since Donnellan (1966) introduced his distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions, many have come to think that the distinction is at bottom a pragmatic one: i.e., that the difference between referential and attributive arises at the level of speaker's meaning rather the level of sentence- or utterance-meaning.[1] This claim, which I shall call *the pragmatic thesis*, holds that Gricean (or similar) pragmatic mechanisms would enable one, by using a description, to effect a reference to a particular individual or individuals, regardless of whether it were part of the semantic function of descriptions to do so. Accordingly, descriptions could be used *as if* they were singular referring expressions, even if their one and only semantically significant interpretation were the attributive reading captured by Russell's (1905) theory of descriptions.[2] The phenomenon of referential use would thus pose no threat to Russell's theory, if the pragmatic thesis were correct.

But the pragmatic thesis has its doubters, and it has lately been challenged, independently though on similar grounds, by Marga Reimer (1998) and Michael Devitt (forthcoming).[3] In their view, pragmatics might be able to account for the *occasional* referential use of a description, but the fact that descriptions are *regularly* so used – that referential uses are *standard* (statistically frequent) uses of descriptions – would seem to provide considerable evidence that there is in fact a (semantic) *convention* of using descriptions referentially. And if there were such a convention, Russell's theory would be incorrect, or at least seriously incomplete, after all.

Although Reimer and Devitt's conclusions are not implausible and may well be true, I will contend here that their arguments are not successful. In so doing, I make no attempt to deal with the many other objections that philosophers have leveled at Russell's theory of descriptions; in particular, I shall set aside the many difficult issues concerning incomplete (or improper) definite descriptions. Nor will I try to argue that the pragmatic approach provides a better account of the referential/attributive distinction than do semantic approaches (although I shall make some remarks bearing on this issue toward the end). The goal, rather, is merely to show that neither the pragmatic thesis, nor consequently Russell's theory, need be threatened by the frequency of the referential use.

2. DONNELLAN'S DISTINCTION

A referential use of a definite description occurs when a speaker utters a description of the form 'the F' to draw her audience's attention to something (or someone), in order to say something specifically about it. In Donnellan's parlance, such descriptions occur *inessentially*, for the speaker could have used a different description, or a name or demonstrative, to achieve the same communicative end. In contrast, a description is used attributively when the speaker's goal is to say something about whomever or whatever satisfies some descriptive condition. The speaker may even know (or think she knows) who or what it is that uniquely satisfies the condition. It being irrelevant to her communicative goal that it is this particular thing/person and not some other, however, the description can be

said to occur *essentially*, for it is the descriptive condition rather than the individual that enters into the proposition she means.

To illustrate, suppose I plan a dinner party, and one of the invited guests informs me that she is bringing with her the author of the anonymously published novel *Primary Colors*. Knowing that you greatly admire the novel and would be keen on meeting its mysterious author, I might tempt you to attend by uttering:

(1)　　The author of *Primary Colors* is coming to dinner.

Even if I know who the author is, this individual would be irrelevant to the proposition I mean to convey. Contrast this case with another, where you and I both know that *Primary Colors* was authored by our mutual acquaintance J.K. Knowing that you find J.K. a terrible bore and wishing to warn you that he will attend, I might again utter (1). Now, however, it would seem that J.K. is crucial to the thought I convey, whereas the fact that he authored *Primary Colors* seems largely irrelevant: I exploit our mutual knowledge that he is the author in order to refer to him, in order to communicate that he (J.K.) is coming to dinner. The referential use thus involves an intention to communicate a singular proposition, whereas the attributive use involves an intention to communicate a purely general proposition.[4]

In light of this difference, it is tempting to suppose that descriptions are in fact semantically ambiguous, that they sometimes function semantically as quantifier expressions in more-or-less the fashion set down by Russell, and sometimes as genuine referring expressions or singular terms, just like demonstratives and proper names. Notice, furthermore, that a semantic ambiguity of this sort would mean that description-sentences (as I shall call sentences of the form 'The F is G') can have either of two logical forms: singular or general. And since logical form is considered the output of syntactic processing, such a semantic ambiguity would appear to require an ambiguity of syntactic structure as well.[5] Donnellan himself is uncomfortable with these conclusions: "It does not appear plausible to account for this, either, as an ambiguity in the sentence. [. . .] Nor does it seem at all attractive to suppose an ambiguity in the meaning of the words" (1966, p. 244). But many others, Devitt and Reimer included, find the ambiguity approach tempting, even if Donnellan does not.

3. THE IMPLICATURE ACCOUNT

There is, however, another possibility, which is to treat referential uses as parasitic, pragmatic extensions of a single, attributive form. The paradigm of pragmatically extended usage is of course Grice's notion of conversational implicature, wherein a speaker produces an utterance with one conventional meaning to communicate something else (either in addition or instead). For instance, if I ask you what color shirt you're wearing to dinner and you reply with:

(2)   The shirt looks blue

your remark would naturally be taken to suggest that the shirt isn't really blue, or at least that there's some question as to whether it is blue (Grice, 1961). It seems wrong however to say that these further suggestions are part of the conventional or 'encoded' meaning of your utterance. What (2) seems to say, strictly speaking, is merely that the shirt appears blue, that it is apt to cause a certain familiar type of visual experience that we might call 'bluish'. The further suggestion that the shirt's actual color is somehow in doubt is a pragmatic effect, to be explained (according to Grice and his followers) by the joint presumption that speakers make their utterances sufficiently informative and at the same time accurate or well-supported.[6] In the present case, you were asked what color your shirt is, not what color it appears to be. So by telling us only what color it appears to be, you provide less information than requested, violating Grice's maxim of Quantity. Ordinarily, the best explanation for such a violation is that the speaker did so in order not to violate another conversational norm, in this case the obligation to speak accurately. Your audience can infer, then, that you believe the color of the shirt to be somehow in doubt, and if, finally, you intend your audience to reach that conclusion, you will have conversationally implicated the proposition so believed.

Now the pragmatic thesis holds that something very similar to example (2) goes on when descriptions are used referentially. Take again my utterance of (1) ('The author of *Primary Colors* is coming to dinner') in a context where it is common ground between us that J.K. is (or at least claims to be) the one and only author of said novel. An obvious logical consequence of (1), together with this item of mutual knowledge, is that J.K. is coming to dinner, so

you can safely assume that I believe this singular proposition. If, moreover, there is no reason to think that I am not conforming to the accepted norms of effective communication, you can safely assume that I have evidence for (1). In light of your dislike for J.K., this is moreover a proposition that you would be interested to know, and so the assumption that I mean that J.K. is coming to dinner gives my utterance obvious relevance.

Thus, the best explanation for my uttering (1) would seem to be that I both think and intend you to realize that I think (and therefore *mean*) that J.K. is coming to dinner. The inference is clearly defeasible; were I to continue: 'The only reason I have for thinking that the author of *Primary Colors* is coming to dinner is that an invited guest told me she would bring him. But J.K. is on a cruise and won't be back in town for another month, and we all know that his authorship of that novel is still in question.' In that case, I make it known that I have evidence for (1) that does *not* constitute adequate reason to think that J.K. is coming to dinner, and so I effectively 'cancel' the implicature.[7] Without such a disclaimer, however, an utterance of the form 'The F is G' would seem quite generally, in any context where it is common ground that some particular b is the F, to implicate conversationally the singular proposition that b is G.

It appears, then, that the referential use of descriptions can be explained either semantically, by positing an ambiguity, or pragmatically, as a matter of conversational implicature. Now defenders of the pragmatic thesis typically argue that the burden of proof lies on the ambiguity thesis. Both approaches, semantic and pragmatic, allow that descriptions can function semantically as quantifiers; both, that is, agree that the attributive use is semantically significant. The question is whether we should posit an additional referential meaning, and the availability of the pragmatic alternative seems to show that positing such an ambiguity is unnecessary. Conversational implicature is, after all, a familiar and (relatively) uncontroversial phenomenon, and Grice's theory of conversation provides it with a simple, powerful explanation. Even if Grice's theory is wrong in the details (as many now think), still it seems undeniable that speakers of a purely Russellian language (i.e., a language wherein descriptions have only the attributive meaning) could use descriptions to refer. So the pragmatic approach has the

virtue of parsimony on its side and, other things being equal, would seem to provide a better explanation of the referential use.[8]

4. THE REGULAR USE ARGUMENT

But it is Devitt and Reimer's contention that other things are *not* equal, that the pragmatic approach can*not* explain *all* the data pertaining to referential use. They are, to be sure, both willing to grant that Griceans can account for *some* of the data. Reimer agrees, she says, "that *the mere fact* that definite descriptions can be used referentially – to communicate singular propositions – does not disprove, or in any way threaten, Russell's theory" (p. 91, emphasis added). Likewise, Devitt admits that "[t]he familiar Gricean point prevents any simple inference from the referential use of [descriptions] to their having a referential meaning: [descriptions], like any other expression, can speaker mean what they do not conventionally mean" (p. 9). Thus, neither critic would appear to have any qualms with Grice's theory of conversation, at least not in broad outline.

Rightly, however, they insist that the pragmatic approach must account for *all* the data pertaining to referential use. In particular, it has to account for the fact that descriptions are *standardly* used to refer – that referential uses are statistically frequent – and this (they claim) poses a problem. Here is Devitt:

> When a person has a thought with a particular F object in mind, there is a regularity of her using 'the F' to express that thought. And there need be no special stage setting enabling her to conversationally imply what she has not literally said, nor any sign that her audience needs to use a Gricean derivation to understand what she means. This regularity is strong evidence that there is a *convention* of using 'the F' to express a thought about a particular F. (p. 5)

And if there were such a convention, it would seem that Donnellan's distinction is a semantic one after all.[9]

But it seems to me that the semantic significance of the referential use is not so easily established. First off, it will no doubt be recalled that Grice's theory of conversation introduces a distinction between *particularized* and *generalized* conversational implicatures (henceforth, PCIs and GCIs). The former depend highly on context; alter the setting much at all and the implicature will simply disappear,

perhaps to be replaced by another. In the right context, for instance, one could use sentence (3):

(3)   It's after 5 p.m.

to communicate that it's time for a meeting to adjourn, or that it's time for it to begin, or that it's too late to go to the bank, or that Allison will be home soon, and so on. In these cases, the hearer has to know a good deal about the context and use that information (plus the maxims of conversation) to 'calculate' the implicature.

But GCIs are different. To say that an implicature is generalized is to say that it would *normally* be carried by an utterance of the sentence in question, being present unless something unusual about the context indicates otherwise. For instance, the use of 'looks' in a sentence like (2) ('The shirt looks blue') seems usually to implicate that there is some reason to doubt that the object has the attribute in question (Grice, 1961). Similar phenomena arise with logical connectives and quantifier expressions. Many sentences of the form 'P or Q' are such that their use would regularly implicate that one or the other disjunct is false, as in (4):

(4)   Mary has (either) a Ph.D. or an M.D.

Likewise, many sentences of the form 'P and Q' would regularly implicate a temporal order, as in (5), and others would implicate a causal order, as in (6):

(5)   John stood up and opened the door.
(6)   Susan stood up and hit her head.

And many sentences of the form 'Some As are Bs' would regularly implicate that some As are not, as in (7):

(7)   Some members of the department enjoyed the talk.

In each case, the likely intended meaning is readily appreciated; no contextual information or 'stage setting' needs to be provided or even imagined in order to make it apparent. And yet in each case, we can still imagine contexts where the standard interpretation would be absent: contexts in which it is cancelled explicitly (e.g., where the speaker adds '. . . and in fact they all enjoyed the talk') or implicitly (e.g., where it is common ground that the department has only one member).

So the first point in reply to the regular use argument is that it does not seem to follow, from the fact that an expression is standardly used in a certain way, that that use does not involve a conversational implicature. Likewise, it does not follow that the communicated content is not conversationally implicated from the fact that hearers can grasp that content directly, without working through a Gricean derivation. When a conversational implicature is generalized – when it would normally be carried by the use of a certain sentence-type – the implicated content can become a *default interpretation* for that type of sentence. For hearers who have calculated that type of implicature before, habit takes over, allowing them to jump to the intended reading without going through the canonical inference pattern. The implicature becomes 'intuitively grasped' (Grice, 1975), the inferential process 'short-circuited' by the weight of precedent (Bach and Harnish, 1979). Crucially, however, the default interpretation remains a conversational implicature; the interpretative habit stems from one's having calculated such implicatures in the past, making one's grasp of the intended message dependent (albeit diachronically) on pragmatic principles.

Now the pragmatic thesis, baldly stated above, does not specify what type of pragmatic phenomenon the referential use is supposed to involve. Still, several considerations point to the conclusion that referential uses of descriptions are more like GCIs than PCIs. In the first place, it will surely be granted the referential use is a standard use of description sentences. As the regular use argument points out, referential uses are hardly uncommon, and in a wide range of contexts, the referential reading seems to be the preferred interpretation of a descriptive utterance. In particular, any context where it is common ground between speaker and hearer that some object b is 'the F' (i.e., where it is believed that b is either the only F or the only salient F) seems to be one in which an utterance of 'The F is G' would normally (absent special indications to the contrary) be both meant and understood referentially. Thus the referential reading can function as a default interpretation: whenever it is common ground that b is (or is believed to be) the F, hearers can take it for granted that an utterance of 'The F is G' is to be understood to mean that b is G. They needn't reflect on whether the singular proposition

is relevant; they needn't pause to examine whether the speaker's evidence for thinking that the F is G comes from his knowledge that b is both the F and G. These conditions will ordinarily be satisfied whenever it is common ground that b is the F, so the hearer can simply take them for granted and interpret the speaker as meaning the singular proposition unless and until he is given some positive reason not to.

It appears, then, that Griceans can grant that the referential use is a standard employment of definite descriptions; they can agree that no special stage setting is required; and they can affirm that hearers do not (at least not usually) employ a Gricean calculus to recover the intended meaning. These facts add up to a compelling demonstration that referential uses are not PCIs, but they are all to be expected if they are instead GCIs.

To be sure, none of the above shows that referential uses really are GCIs, for the above facts are also to be expected if descriptions have referential meanings. So far, then, we have a standoff, but Reimer and Devitt offer in addition three distinguishable considerations to shore up the regularity argument, i.e., to show the regularity of the referential use is *better* explained semantically.[10] The first consideration is that speakers of a genuinely Russellian language would have at their disposal other, more direct means for communicating singular propositions; the second consideration involves a comparison to complex demonstratives; and the third involves a comparison to dead metaphors. I shall discuss each of these issues in turn.

5. REFERRING IN A RUSSELLIAN LANGUAGE

A language is Russellian, for present purposes, if description sentences in that language all express general propositions of the sort depicted by Russell's theory. Clearly, speakers of a Russellian language *could* use descriptions referentially, but there is a further question as to whether and how often they *would* do so, having other means at their disposal for referring: names ('J.K.'), simple demonstratives ('this', 'that'), complex demonstratives ('this F', 'that F'), and pronouns ('he', 'she'). Not only are these means available, but their use would enable Russellian speakers to communicate singular

propositions *directly*, by expressing a sentence whose conventional meaning is singular. Thus it appears likely that "[s]peakers of Russellian English would behave differently from speakers of English because in the vast majority of situations where speakers of English use a [description] referentially, speakers of Russell English would use a demonstrative or pronoun" (Devitt, p. 10). Indeed, speakers of English seem to behave exactly the way they would if they spoke a language ('Donnellan English') in which descriptions really were ambiguous between attributive and referential meanings (*ibid.*; Reimer, p. 97). So while it is true that regular referential use is consistent with the pragmatic thesis, the present argument is that the pragmatic thesis makes it *unlikely* that descriptions would be regularly so used.

The argument is not entirely persuasive. Consider again our initial example, where I utter (1) ('The author of *Primary Colors* is coming to dinner') to tell you that J.K. is coming to dinner. Since we both know this person and both know his name, I could just as well have said 'J.K. is coming to dinner'. For a variety of reasons, however, I might prefer to use the description: perhaps I mean to be mocking or ironic, using the description to draw attention to the fact that J.K. likes to brag about his literary accomplishment. Or perhaps I choose to use the description so that others within earshot (who do not know that J.K. authored that work) would not pick up my intended meaning, or so that they would be jealous of my rubbing elbows with a famous author. Then again, we might know two people named 'J.K.' and use the description to be clear as to which one. Or perhaps I know that you met this J.K. once but am unsure whether you remember his name. For all sorts of reasons, a speaker who wishes to communicate a singular proposition may find a description more appropriate, useful, or reliable.[11]

Similar points apply to demonstratives. If J.K. were standing right there, I could point to him and say 'He is coming to dinner' or 'That man there is coming to dinner'. But if we're in a crowd, an overt demonstration might not be effective; in other circumstances (e.g., in church), an effective demonstration might be considered rude. Or again, I could use a pronoun or demonstrative if he had already been mentioned in conversation and were thus contextually

salient. But if he has not yet been raised to salience, a description might prove the easiest, most direct way to do so.

The present argument against the implicature account thus seems to overlook the many reasons why a speaker might choose to be indirect – i.e., to implicate a singular proposition rather than express one. Oftentimes we are not positioned so as to use a pronoun, demonstrative, or name. Suppose I wish for you to hand me a certain jar of pickles from the refrigerator. The individual jar does not have a name, presumably, and I can't very well just ask you to hand me 'it', since it wouldn't be clear to what 'it' is supposed to refer. I could point and ask you to hand me 'that', but if I were in a position to point unambiguously to a particular jar in the refrigerator, I would probably be close enough to reach out and grab it, in which case there would be no need for me to refer to it at all.

In some cases, a complex demonstrative in place of a pronoun obviates the need for overt demonstration. One could say for instance 'Please hand me that jar of pickles' or 'This bottle of gin is nearly empty'. Doing so might (depending on the context) allow one to convey directly the singular proposition one means, but using a complex demonstrative 'this/that F' has its own problems. For one, it would often suggest that there are *other Fs* about, and a speaker may not wish to give that impression. If, for instance, I see you reaching for the gin and say 'That bottle of gin is empty', I might get your hopes up that there is another, nonempty bottle of gin somewhere nearby. If, driving down the road, I see the gas gauge on empty and say 'This car is out of gas' (instead of 'The car is out of gas'), I may seem rather oddly to be suggesting that we switch to another car rather than fill up the tank.

In general, then, it does not seem that speakers of a Russellian language would typically use names, pronouns, or demonstratives in place of definite descriptions whenever they wish to communicate singular propositions. Sometimes they would, of course, but how one chooses to refer – directly (with a singular term) or indirectly (by description) – depends on a variety of factors: whether the object has a name, whether one can be confident that the name is known by the audience, whether the object is in a position to be demonstrated, whether the demonstration would be rude or otherwise inappropriate, and so on. And even when these conditions are

satisfied, a speaker may have more specific reasons (e.g., a desire to be ironic or circumspect) to use a description in place of a singular term. To be sure, these facts do not establish that speakers *always* have such reasons when they use descriptions referentially. For all we have seen, it may be that speakers use descriptions referentially even when they have no reason whatsoever to be indirect. If so, the case against the referential thesis could be strengthened considerably. But the data to support such a claim seem to be lacking, and testing it would surely require a more detailed examination than I can provide here of the circumstances in which descriptions are used referentially.

6. A COMPARISON WITH COMPLEX DEMONSTRATIVES

The second argument against the pragmatic account involves an analogy between referential descriptions and complex demonstratives. Reimer, for instance, points out that sentences with demonstratives and indexicals are *standardly* used to communicate singular propositions and that this fact moreover supports the conclusion that such sentences are *literally* (i.e., *conventionally*) so used (p. 95). Similarly, then, the fact that description-sentences are standardly used to communicate singular propositions ought to support the conclusion that descriptions-sentences are conventionally so used. In much the same fashion, Devitt points out that we can typically exchange a complex demonstrative for a description (or vice versa) "without apparent cost to our goal of communicating a singular thought" (Devitt, p. 11). In our original example, for instance, I could just as well have said 'That author of *Primary Colors* is coming to dinner' or, if the context were right, 'That man is coming to dinner', and you would have understood me just the same. Thus it seems plausible that the description makes precisely the same contribution to the proposition expressed as would the complex demonstrative.

The parallel between complex demonstratives and descriptions used referentially is suggestive, but is it close enough to make for a strong analogical argument? One significant difference is exposed if we examine standard approaches to the semantics of complex demonstratives. Usually one assumes that an expression of the form

'that F' consists of a simple demonstrative 'that' plus a modifying nominal 'F'. The singular reference of the complex is thus accomplished by the simple demonstrative 'that', which (depending on your view of demonstrative reference) refers to an appropriately demonstrated object, or the object which the speaker had in mind, or the object in which the use of the demonstrative is causally grounded. (For our purposes, it does not matter which, if any, of these views of simple demonstrative reference is correct.) The nominal 'F', on the other hand, is assumed either to contribute a restriction which the referent of 'that' must satisfy or else to be semantically inert. So we can say either that an object is the referent of a complex demonstrative just in case it is the value of the component simple demonstrative *and* falls within the extension of the accompanying nominal, or we can drop the latter requirement and assert only the former.[12] For our purposes, we needn't worry as to which version correctly describes the role of the accompanying nominal. The important point is that on either approach, the reference of the complex is determined, at least in part, by the value of the simple demonstrative inside.

Notice, however, that a similar analysis of 'The F' is untenable. We cannot, that is, suppose that 'the' is a simple demonstrative whose reference is constrained by the accompanying nominal. For it would seem undeniable that an expression is a genuine referring expression *only if* it can occupy the subject position of a subject-predicate sentence. More generally, it seems that a necessary condition for being a genuine referring expression is that the expression in question be capable of filling the argument positions of predicates. 'That' can occupy argument positions and thus meets the necessary condition, but "the" does not: sentences of the form 'The is G' are not well-formed; they don't even make sense, which strongly suggests, even if it does not quite prove, that 'the' (and similarly 'a') are not simple demonstratives. And since the standard account of complex demonstratives could only be extended to referential descriptions if 'the' were a referring expression, it seems that complex demonstratives and referential descriptions are not so similar after all.

The disanalogy here turns on the orthodox view that complex demonstratives are not only syntactically complex but also complex

qua referring expressions, having other referring expressions as proper parts, and that view can of course be questioned. One might, for instance, propose that 'that F' is really a *simple* referring expression: that while it is syntactically complex, it is semantically simple, with neither the 'that' nor the 'F' accomplishing the singular reference by itself. Such a view, if it were plausible, could readily be extended to 'the F', since it would not, unlike the previous view, imply that 'the' is itself a referring expression. And Devitt seems often to have such a view in mind: he proposes, in passing, that "'the/an/that F' would designate an object that 'F' applies to and that 'the/an/that F' is causally grounded in by perception" and contrasts this proposal with the standard view according to which 'that' and 'F' "contribute independently" (p. 15).[13] As a view of complex demonstratives, however, this proposal seems a bit implausible, denying as it does that the simple demonstrative 'that' is a semantically significant component of 'that F'. Indeed, the present proposal seems to mean that 'that F' is really a *simple* demonstrative – a demonstrative expression no part of which is itself demonstrative, in which the word 'that' would seem to occur as a sort of 'orthographic accident'. The current proposal thus preserves the relatively superficial similarity between 'that F' and 'the F' (a similarity of use) at the cost of denying the deeper similarity between the 'that' in 'that F' and 'that' as it occurs in isolation.

Still, none of above shows that referential descriptions are not simple referring expressions. If so, we would have to discard the analogy which Devitt thinks unites referential descriptions with complex demonstratives; on this view, it would be more apt to compare referential descriptions to simple demonstratives. But it seems to me that there are in fact significant disanalogies between referential descriptions and simple demonstratives, for the contexts in which they are standardly used to refer are fairly different. A simple demonstrative is typically used when the intended referent is contextually salient, either as a result of a demonstration or as a result of previous mention. If I use a simple demonstrative when the intended referent is not salient, the result is likely to be confusion. Descriptions, on the other hand, can be used to refer whether the intended referent is already salient or not, and the reason for this difference seems clear: descriptions, being semantically complex,

can be understood from the meaning of their components alone and thus can be used to raise an otherwise unobvious object to salience. Descriptions, in other words, are more like verbal demonstrat*ions*; simple demonstratives, in comparison, are merely tags: they can accompany demonstrations, but by themselves they cannot be used to demonstrate. If you can't identify the intended referent from context alone, you ordinarily won't be able to identify it from the fact that someone has used a demonstrative.

The semantic complexity of descriptions is thus quite central to the practice of using them to refer, and in this respect they differ noticeably from simple demonstratives. Perhaps, then, it would be more apt for the referentialist to compare referential descriptions to names than to either simple or complex demonstratives. After all, some descriptive expressions do appear to function semantically like names: so-called 'descriptive names' like 'the Eiffel Tower' or 'the Golden Gate Bridge'. These, presumably, are conventionally frozen forms – idioms – where the entire expression is grasped as if it were a single word; the meaning is learned whole, not calculated piecemeal. With descriptive names, it does seem that a constituent 'the' plays no semantic role. Notice, for instance, that many otherwise similar names simply leave out the initial 'the': e.g., 'Coit Tower' and 'London Bridge'. Surely the difference between 'the Golden Gate Bridge' and 'London Bridge' is stylistic only and not semantically significant, so one could argue with considerable plausibility that *some* descriptive phrases – i.e., the descriptive names – are simple referring expressions.

But descriptive names are an exception, quite different from the usual sort of case where a description is used referentially. Unlike descriptive names (and like demonstratives), the reference of a referential description is context-dependent: the reference of 'the Golden Gate Bridge' remains constant across different contexts of utterance, but the reference of 'the bridge' varies widely. Furthermore, referential descriptions are typically not idioms or frozen forms. Most any description can be used referentially, and there needn't be an 'initial baptism' to fix the reference. So in the end the comparison to descriptive names is not apt either.

In sum: there certainly are suggestive similarities between the referential uses of descriptions and of demonstratives and names.

But the differences are equally significant and seem to belie any attempt to argue by analogy that they require the same treatment in semantics.

7. THE PROBLEM OF DEAD METAPHORS

The two arguments just considered aim to show that referential uses of descriptions are conventionally sanctioned. Neither denies that there can be standard-but-nonliteral interpretations such as generalized conversational implicatures; they merely claim that such pragmatic devices do not provide the best explanation of referential use. The final argument I shall consider is different, casting doubt on the very idea of generalized conversational implicature.

Metaphor is often looked upon as a Gricean paradigm, wherein the metaphorical speaker's meaning departs from the conventionally determined utterance meaning. A *dead* metaphor, on the other hand, is an expression whose once-metaphorical use has congealed into a new conventional meaning. Reimer gives the example of the verb 'incense', the original meaning of which was *to make fragrant with incense*. Due to familiar analogies between burning and anger, one could use a sentence of the form 'S became incensed' to mean that *S became very angry*, the intended content presumably being recoverable via Gricean pragmatic inference. Today the original meaning is still available, but the metaphor is dead: through frequent use, the one-time conversational implicature has become a second sense, leaving the expression semantically ambiguous.[14]

Dead metaphors create two problems for the pragmatist about referential descriptions. First of all, they show that an expression can be genuinely ambiguous even when one of its uses is predictable, on pragmatic grounds, from the other. The upshot is that a pragmatic treatment of an alleged ambiguity is not automatically superior. As Devitt puts it, the pragmatist "is mistaken in suggesting that the ability of speakers to give a Gricean derivation of the meaning conveyed [by an] expression makes that meaning a matter of pragmatics and not semantics" (p. 7), and this effectively undermines the standard parsimony argument for the pragmatic thesis. This first point I will happily grant for the sake of argument: parsimony arguments are notoriously problematic, whether the

subject is linguistics or some other science like biology. Nature sometimes does do things in vain, and natural languages would seem to be no exception.

But dead metaphors do more than pose a problem for the Gricean parsimony argument; they also form the basis of a positive argument for the ambiguity thesis and against the appeal to generalized conversational implicature. In the case of 'incense', the metaphor is dead and the expression ambiguous *precisely because* the metaphorical use became standard and familiar. Speakers/hearers thus learned to grasp the intended meaning directly and intuitively, "without the mediation of any Gricean-style inferences" (Reimer, p. 98). Similarly, referential uses are standard and familiar, and phenomenologically it seems that the intended singular proposition is grasped without Gricean inference. So what then is the difference? Why does the referential use not count as an additional literal meaning as well? The same question may of course be asked about any alleged case of generalized conversational implicature: if the use is standard, if it is grasped intuitively, then arguably it should count as an additional literal meaning, even though it can be predicted from an antecedently recognized meaning. This, then, is their main argument against the pragmatic thesis: given that dead metaphors are ambiguous, it would be arbitrary and capricious to insist that descriptions are not.

There are, however, several interesting differences between dead metaphors and referential descriptions to which friends of the pragmatic thesis may appeal. First, there is an intuitive difference: most speakers, I presume, share the intuition that (e.g.) 'incense' is ambiguous. Indeed, most speakers are unlikely to see any important distinction between the ambiguity of 'incense' and that of obvious homonyms like 'pole' or 'bank'. If pressed, I admit, many speakers would guess that the two uses of 'incense' are historically related; they might wager that the one use began life as a metaphorical extension based on familiar metaphorical connections between burning and anger. But then again, for many homonyms they might also venture to guess that there is a common ancestry. Take 'pole', for instance, which can mean either *a long slender shaft of wood or metal* or *the axial extremity through a sphere*. If one pictures the axis of a sphere as a physical shaft passing through the sphere and

jutting up from either end, one might guess (incorrectly) that the latter sense was originally a metaphorical extension of the former. Or take 'bank', the paradigm case of lexical ambiguity. The original meaning of 'bank' was *bench* or *shelf*, which (apparently) lent itself to the metaphorical description of a river's edge; likewise, moneychangers worked behind benches which thus came to be called 'banks' and their activity to be called 'banking'.[15] In such cases, then, speakers may well guess (correctly or incorrectly) that one sense of an ambiguous expression is derived somehow from the other. Nonetheless, they are all characterized by a clear intuition that the word does indeed have two (or more) distinguishable senses. Whether the two meanings are thought to be historically related is thus irrelevant: *psychologically*, it is as if there are two unrelated words which happen to have the same sound.

Matters stand differently with the uses that Griceans claim to be generalized implicatures. Take 'look', from example (2) above: no one, I think, has a clear intuition that 'look' is ambiguous. One's adherence to a philosophical theory of language might convince one that it is, but it seems highly unlikely that a typical speaker would place it on a list of ambiguous expressions. Similarly for the many other cases that Griceans consider generalized implicatures: speakers will agree, if it is pointed out, that 'and' can be used with or without a suggestion of temporal priority; still no one has the intuition that 'and' is ambiguous. And neither does anyone have a pretheoretical intuition that 'the F' is ambiguous, a point made by Donnellan himself: though "it does not appear plausible" to account for the referential/attributive distinction with either a semantic or a syntactic ambiguity, he says, still these judgments "are [just] intuitions" (1966, p. 244). Donnellan would here seem to be saying that these intuitions, though hardly decisive, place the burden of proof on the philosopher who would claim a semantic or syntactic ambiguity in description sentences. In contrast, it would surely be perverse to claim that there is a similar burden on he who would claim that 'incense', 'bank', and 'pole' are ambiguous.

I doubt, however, that intuition carries much weight in these disputes. It would be helpful if there were a deeper difference between dead metaphors and referential uses to which the pragmatist could appeal, and perhaps there is. It seems plausible that a

speaker will find a word intuitively ambiguous when she mentally represents it as having two separate meanings – as if it were two distinct lexical items. And whether she represents a word as having one meaning or two is presumably a function of the way in which the word was *learned*. The two uses of 'incense', for instance, probably have to be learned separately, just as one would learn any genuine homonym. Granted, if one knew what incense (the substance) was, and if one were antecedently familiar with metaphors connecting burning and emotion, one *might* learn the one use of 'incense' as a pragmatic extension of the other. It seems unlikely that a child acquiring a first language would be able to make these connections, however. More likely, the language learner would have to acquire these two uses separately and independently, not having sufficient familiarity with either incense (the substance) or with burning-anger metaphors to make the connection.

Thus, while it is likely true that one use of 'incense' is *historically dependent* on the other, it seems quite plausible that the two uses are *psychologically independent* of each other, speakers representing these uses as if they involved two unrelated words. With descriptions, on the other hand, it is hard to believe that referential and attributive uses would have to be learned separately. More likely, children learn first, based on distributional evidence, that 'the' is a determiner and classify it grammatically with quantifiers like 'some' and 'all'. Subsequently, children discover (perhaps quite rapidly) that quantifier expressions lend themselves to the goal of drawing a hearer's attention to an object or set of objects – i.e., to referring. And *if* that is in fact how individual language learners acquire the practice of using descriptions referentially, then we should expect referential uses to be *psychologically dependent* on the attributive.

Admittedly, the present claim rests on a conjecture: i.e., that language learners are sensitive to distributional evidence and thus can use it (perhaps among other sources of information) to lump 'the' with more obvious quantifiers.[16] And it assumes furthermore that language learners have sufficient pragmatic sophistication to comprehend referring uses of quantifier expressions via the Gricean route.[17] These are both empirical issues, and I cannot investigate them here.[18] For present purposes, the point I wish to make is merely conditional: *if* individual language learners treat 'the F' as a quanti-

fier expression, and *if* they can comprehend what a speaker means when she uses a quantifier expression to refer, *then* they would have *no need* to posit a second, referential meaning for descriptions. Thus it is plausible that the referential use is *not* represented independently, as one represents the separate (and independently learnable) meanings for a genuinely ambiguous word.

So we have hit upon two reasons to think that the referential use is dissimilar to formerly pragmatic but now conventionalized metaphors like 'incense'. First, the word 'incense' is intuitively ambiguous, whereas phrases of the form 'the F' are not (assuming that the constituent 'F' is not itself ambiguous). Second, there is a difference in mode of acquisition: the secondary use of 'incense' is presumably learned separately, as an additional rule or convention over and above the original meaning of 'incense'. On the other hand, the referential use of descriptions can be understood pragmatically even by children, making it unnecessary for them to acquire it as a separate form from the attributive. Clearly, neither of these considerations *proves* that the referential use is not conventionalized; taken together, however, they do suggest that the referential and attributive uses are not mentally represented independently of each other after the fashion of the two meanings of an ambiguous expression.

Notice, finally, that the referential use could be psychologically dependent in this way on the quantificational use even if hearers rarely go through the full-blown Gricean procedure in order to grasp the intended singular proposition. For suppose that a hearer has done so enough times in the past: he could subsequently form a habit of interpreting description sentences referentially and thus grasp the intended singular proposition quite immediately, without working it out from conversational norms. That, of course, is just what the account based on Grice's notion of generalized conversational implicature predicts: when a type of implicature is familiar, the intended proposition can be grasped intuitively and without the inferential rigmarole. Still, the habit so formed would be psychologically dependent on the individual's understanding of the quantificational use.

The upshot of these considerations is that it is not enough, for Reimer and Devitt's purposes, to establish that the referential use can be immediately and intuitively grasped. What they need to show

rather is that the two uses are psychologically independent of each other, and that is another matter entirely.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is surely a remarkable and suggestive fact about definite descriptions that they are *regularly* used by speakers to refer. In this paper, I have tried to show that this fact can be explained quite adequately within a pragmatic account of referential use and thus without abandoning the attractive position that "descriptive phrases have no relevant systematic duplicity of meaning" (Grice, 1969). I have not, however, attempted to argue *for* the pragmatic thesis, and it may now be apparent why I have not.

In my view, the question whether Donnellan's distinction is semantically significant is best taken as a question regarding how the meanings of descriptive phrases are mentally represented. As such it is ultimately an empirical question about the psychological processes that underwrite language, and consequently a wide variety of empirical evidence may prove relevant. One source of evidence is of course the system of regularities observed in language use, and I thus agree with Reimer and Devitt that the frequency of the referential use is a relevant source of evidence. But it is only one source, and in the present case it appears not to discriminate between the two competing hypotheses. Other types of evidence may come from other sources: from the study of language acquisition, from the study of other languages, or even conceivably from the study of neuropsychological deficits. At present, it would be an understatement to say that such evidence as we have does not point clearly one way or the other.

In taking this position, I admittedly presuppose a sort of psychologism about linguistic meaning; the position assumes, that is, that the conventional meaning of an expression (and whether it has more than one such meaning) is intimately connected to how that expression is mentally represented – how it is stored in one's 'mental lexicon'. That assumption is certainly debatable. Others might find the relation between an expression's meaning and its *use* more crucial that the relation between its meaning and its mode of representation in thought. Reimer, for instance, emphasizes "the

important connection between *standard* use and *literal* use" (p. 98), and she takes it largely for granted that hearers' ability to grasp a certain meaning *immediately* is a sign that the meaning thus grasped is conventional. Devitt appears to operate under a similar assumption to Reimer's: "We can agree that if speakers *not only could but do* use a Gricean derivation to grasp the meaning conveyed then the meaning is a pragmatic not semantic matter", he says. "But people *do not now* grasp what speakers mean by the verb 'incense' in that Gricean way. That is why the metaphor is really dead" (p. 7). I suspect, therefore, that our disagreement stems from differing views of the relation between meaning and use. I do not at present see how the matter is to be settled, but surely its resolution will turn on larger issues pertaining to the proper task of linguistic theory.[19]

NOTES

[1] Defenders of this view include Grice (1969), Kripke (1977), Salmon (1982), Bach (1987), and Neale (1990). For the purposes of this paper, the various differences between the views of these philosophers are largely irrelevant.

[2] Russell held that sentences of the form 'An F is G' are equivalent to 'at least one thing is both F and G' and similarly that sentences of the form 'The F is G' are equivalent to 'exactly one thing is F, and whatever is F is G'. Definite and indefinite descriptions are thus viewed not as genuine referring expressions but as quantifier expressions in disguise. It is widely taken for granted that such an account accurately depicts the logical form of the attributive, and I will do the same in this paper.

[3] While some of the arguments to be discussed are prefigured in Devitt (1981) and Wettstein (1981), they are developed most fully and systematically in Devitt (forthcoming) and Reimer (1998). Hence, all page references will be to these two papers unless otherwise noted. Devitt's paper discusses indefinite as well as definite descriptions; to keep things manageable, I shall focus solely on the definite, although many of the same points would carry over to the indefinite.

[4] Since attributive descriptions can occur in utterances containing *other* singular referring expressions, it would be better to say that a description is used attributively when the speaker does not intend, by using that description, to communicate something singular.

[5] Stampe (1974) argues on different grounds that Donnellan's distinction involves a syntactic ambiguity; I cannot discuss his view here however.

[6] These are Grice's (1975) maxims of Quantity and Quality, respectively. Detailed discussions of Grice's theory and its applications are found in Levinson (1983) and Neale (1992).

[7] 'Cancelability' is a necessary condition for a communicated thought to be conversationally implicated. It is not sufficient, however, since the 'canceling' comment could just as well be disambiguating a semantically ambiguous utterance, as in 'He put the money in a bank, though not in a financial institution'. For further discussion, see Grice (1978); Sadock (1978); Davis (1998).

[8] Kripke (1977), Bach (1987), and Neale (1990) all appeal to parsimony on behalf of the pragmatic thesis. Grice (1978) dubs the relevant principle 'Modified Occam's Razor': 'Senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity'. Davis (1998) rejects Modified Occam's Razor, as does Devitt (forthcoming). I offer a partial defense of the principle in Bontly (forthcoming).

[9] This last premise – that 'is conventional' implies 'is semantically significant' – is certainly questionable, it being often suggested that there are conventions of use ('implicature conventions') as well as conventions of meaning (cf. Davis, 1998; Morgan, 1978). I will not pursue this thought here, however, since it departs from the orthodox Gricean position that implicatures emerge from considerations of communicative rationality and thus have a 'natural' (as opposed to conventional) explanation.

[10] Devitt (forthcoming) offers the first two of these three considerations as if they were additional arguments against the pragmatic thesis, independent of the regular use argument. Reimer (1998) offers them rather as elaborations of the same argument. For two reasons, I follow Reimer: first, these further considerations are all premised on the assumption that the referential use is a regular use of descriptions; second, these considerations all seem meant to show, though in different ways, that the regularity is indeed strong evidence against the pragmatic thesis. Nothing hangs on this choice however.

[11] Similar remarks apply to Donnellan's famous example of referential use, where Jones has been charged with Smith's murder and we are in the courtroom observing the trial. Noticing Jones' odd behavior, I say 'Smith's murderer is insane', intending to communicate that he (Jones) is insane. There are a variety of reasons why I might choose to communicate this thought indirectly. Saying 'Smith's murderer is insane' might have the effect of communicating my certainty that Jones is guilty. Or, if you and I both know that Jones is being framed, the remark might be sarcastic, conveying my contempt for the entire proceeding.

[12] Larson and Segal (1995) propose both alternatives and tentatively opt for the weaker view. Lepore and Ludwig (2000), on the other hand, take the nominal to be truth-conditionally relevant, arguing that sentences of the form 'That F is G' be analyzed as '(The x: x = that and x is F)(x is G)'. I note that either view presupposes that 'that F' contains a simple demonstrative.

[13] Curiously, Devitt also says that his argument for the referentialist thesis is officially neutral between this proposal, on which complex demonstratives are referentially simple, and the standard view of complex demonstratives. The argument of the last paragraph shows his neutrality cannot be maintained.

[14] Some dead metaphors are not ambiguous, the original meaning being long forgotten. The verb 'fornication', for instance, apparently began life as a euphemism literally meaning *activities done in fornice*, i.e., in the vaulted under-

ground dwellings which served as brothels in Rome (an example I owe to Sam Wheeler, pers com). The metaphor is not just dead but dead and buried.

[15] I owe this example to David Sanford (pers. com.).

[16] While there is relatively little work on the acquisition of determiners, there is considerable indirect evidence that distributional patterns could play a role in acquisition. Saffran, Aslin, and Newport (1996) found experimental evidence that 8-month-old children are sensitive to the distribution of phonemes in speech. Mintz, Newport, and Bever (2002) show that distributional evidence can be used to categorize words as nouns and verbs; see also Redington and Chater (1997).

[17] Bloom (2000) discusses considerable evidence that pragmatic understanding plays a crucial role in early language acquisition.

[18] I discuss some evidence bearing on these issues in Bontly (forthcoming).

[19] I wish to thank Michael Devitt, Ruth Millikan, Marga Reimer, Sam Wheeler, an anonymous referee, and (belatedly) Carl Gillett and Bradley Rives.

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