Donnellan: Two Uses for Descriptions

1. **Keith Donnellan** (1931-2015): A philosopher of language.

2. **Two Uses for Definition Descriptions**:

> I will call the two uses of definite description I have in mind the attributive use and the referential use. 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. (285)

(1)   *Smith's murderer* is insane.

- **Attributive use**: the sentence is used to say something about whoever uniquely murdered Smith. Paradigm case: (1) is asserted on purely general grounds.
- **Referential use**: the sentence is used to say something about a particular person – **the one we have in mind**. Paradigm case: (1) is asserted on the basis of odd behavior by the defendant.

> The contrast with such [an attributive] use of [(1)] is one of those situations in whch we expect and intend our audience to realize whom we have in mind when we speak of Smith's murderer and, most importantly, to know that it is this person about whom we are going to say something. (285-6)

'Smith's murderer'

Attributive Use	Referential Use
used to talk about whoever (uniquely?) murdered Smith	used to talk about a particular person
'the F' occurs essentially	'the F' is just a tool

Diff. Truth Conditions: Suppose no one murdered Smith:

Attributive Use	Referential Use
the assertion is automatically not true	the assertion may still be true.

Diff. Comprehension Conditions: Suppose your audience believes no one murdered Smith:

Attributive Use	Referential Use
the audience automatically does not know whom you are talking about	audience may still know whom you are talking about.

Diff. Presuppositions:

Attributive Use	Referential Use
typical presupposition: somebody or other murdered Smith (uniquely?)	typical presupposition: some particular person (e.g. the defendant) murdered Smith

3. **The same description/sentence can be used both ways**. Donnellan seems to hold that the difference between referential and attributive uses of "Smith's murderer" track the presuppositions of its user/audience. Nothing in the sentence requires a referential-friendly, as opposed to an attributive-friendly, presupposition.

> Now the more particular presupposition that we find present in referential uses are clearly not ones we can assign to a definite description in some particular sentence in isolation from a context of use. In order to know that a person presupposes that Jones is Smith's murderer in using the sentence 'Smith's murderer is insane," we have to know that he is using the decsription referentially and also to whom he is referring. The sentence by itself does not tell us any of this. (289)

4. **Speech acts other than assertion**:

   Questions:
   (2)   Who is *the man drinking the martini*?

   - **Attributive**: Teetotaler's Society case
   - **Referential**: As seen at a party

   Commands:
   (3)   Bring me *the book on the table*

5. **No belief required**:

   Suppose: everyone knows the guy on the throne is a usurper.
   (4)   *The king* is not doing anything right now.

6. **Russell is wrong (about referential uses)**:

   > 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.' [Quotation from Russell (1905, 488), quoted at (281)]

   DEFINITION: x is *the denotation of* 'the F' iff x has the property *being identical to some unique F*

Russellian truth conditions: A sentence of the form 'the F is G' is true iff the denotation of 'the F' is G.

$\neg \Rightarrow$: If (1) is used referentially, it may be true even though the denotation of 'Smith's murderer' is sane.

$\neg \Leftarrow$: If (4) is used referentially, it may be false even though the denotation of 'the King' is not doing anything.

7. **The Referential Use is Unconstrained by the Semantic Values of its Constituents**:

The function of the "the King" in (4) is just to get your audience's attention focused on the thing you have in mind. The fact that the expression contains the word "King" makes no systematic contribution to the determination of a referent for the definite description.

Similarly, consider:

(5)   *The discovery of America* is commemorated in this museum exhibit.

One might get one's audience's attention focused on Columbus's landing by calling it *the discovery of America*, even though **everyone nowadays knows** that it wasn't the discovery of America. The words are just a means of directing people's attention; they aren't themselves involved in singling out the thing referred to.

There will be crazy contexts in which just about any definite description can be used referentially to refer to just about any individual.

8. **Logic-choppers vs. Lotus-Eaters**:

- **Logic-choppers**: there are rules governing what expressions stand for and can be used to do. The task of semantics is to state those rules; the philosopher of language can use those rules to answer philosophical questions, like the problem of intentionality. (Paradigm: "On Denoting")
- **Lotus-Eaters**: there aren't really any general rules governing what expressions stand for and can be used to do. Understanding what a sentence says on a given occasion is an art, which makes use of any tools available, including the social, psychological, and environmental factors in play. Semantics, if there can be any such thing, must rest on a complete theory of human social life. (Paradigm: late Wittgenstein)

An expression the logicians seem to be right about:
(6)   The positive square root of 4

An expression the lotus-eaters seem to be right about:
(7)   That one

Donnellan: there is a use of definite descriptions on which they operate just like "that one", to refer to whatever it is that the speaker has in mind. There may be crazy situations in which the definite descriptions (6) is used to refer to an airplane or something.