

Specificity and referentiality

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Indefinite descriptions have been claimed to show an ambiguity, often labeled a specific/nonspecific ambiguity, when they occur in simple sentences which contain no (other) sentence operators with which to vary their scope. This claim is reminiscent of the claim of Donnellan (1966) that definite descriptions may be used referentially as well as attributively. Neale (1990) argued at length against viewing Donnellan's distinction as semantic, and Ludlow & Neale (1991) have argued along similar lines that the specific/nonspecific distinction in indefinite descriptions is not semantic but rather pragmatic. This paper responds to the arguments presented by Ludlow & Neale and presents arguments and evidence that both distinctions **are** semantic.

One important issue is the nature of the specific reading of indefinites. As it is frequently characterized, it is a referential reading – there is reference to some individual, and this individual plays a role in the truth conditions of the utterance. On this view the utterance expresses a singular, or “object dependent” proposition, even one that contains the actual object referred to as a constituent (if we follow Russell on the nature of such propositions). It is a reading so characterized which is the main focus of the Ludlow & Neale critique.

Ludlow & Neale cite three arguments which Russell (1919) gave in support of his quantificational analysis of indefinite descriptions, and opposed to any referential interpretation. Russell's example is (1)

(1) I met a man.

Suppose that the speaker of (1) met Jones, and that (1) is the report of that incident. Nevertheless it would not be contradictory to assert (2):

(2) I met a man but I did not meet Jones.

(2) would be false, under the circumstances, but not contradictory. The second argument is that an addressee can perfectly well understand an utterance of (1) without any knowledge of Jones. And the third argument depends on the fact that a sentence like (3)

(3) I saw a perpetual motion machine.

may be used to express a proposition (albeit a false one even though there is no possible referent for the indefinite description).

All of these arguments suffer from a disability (acknowledged by Ludlow & Neale for the first). No one denies that indefinite descriptions have a purely quantificational reading which would allow a noncontradictory understanding of (2), which someone who doesn't know Jones could well understand, and which would allow (3) to express a proposition. Thus these arguments do not show that sentences like (1) are not ambiguous. In addition the third argument depends on a particular conception of the specific reading, which is problematic on independent grounds. An alternative, on which specific readings of indefinite descriptions are interpreted as constant individual concepts does not have these problems.

Kripke (1978) had argued against viewing Donnellan's referential/attributive distinction as semantic and Ludlow & Neale cite these arguments approvingly and reprise

analogues for indefinites. Kripke had three main arguments against viewing Donnellan's distinction as semantic. One is methodological: it is not good to proliferate ambiguities without warrant. This argument is set aside, pending production of warrant. The second involves a novel argument form of the following structure: if phenomenon A would occur in a language stipulated to have property X, then its occurrence in English cannot argue that English does not have property X. The property in question is having definite descriptions interpreted as Russell claimed, and the phenomenon is an understanding like Donnellan's referential reading. This argument, while clever, is not really conclusive. We might use the same form to argue, for example, that *want* does not mean 'desire', because if it only meant 'lack', people would use it to express desire as well. (See also the discussion in Reimer 1998a.) The third argument involved a modification of an example given by Linsky:

- (4) A. "Her husband is kind to her."
 B. "No, he isn't. The man you're referring to isn't her husband."

The problem is that B's first pronoun should lack an antecedent, since on Donnellan's analysis A has used the phrase *her husband* to refer to the woman's lover. This argument depends on an unfortunate aspect of Donnellan's exposition, one which has been taken as definitive of the referential use of definite descriptions but which in fact need not be so. That is Donnellan's claim that, used referentially, a definite description may refer to an entity that does not meet its descriptive content. But there is independent evidence against this claim of Donnellan's. In fact, that quality (reference to an entity not semantically related to the noun phrase used) is characteristic of speaker's reference as opposed to semantic reference, and holds for both referentially and attributively used definite descriptions as well as proper names.

There are a few positive arguments in favor of a semantic analysis for both the referential-attributive distinction and the specific-nonspecific distinction. Reimer (1998b) argues that if a sentence is standardly used to convey a certain type of proposition, where that proposition is suitably constrained by the linguistic meanings of the parts of the sentence, then, *ceteris paribus*, it expresses that proposition. Wilson (1991) has pointed out that definite descriptions have pronominal uses, including bound variable uses, as in (5)

- (5) a. Serena Williams fought hard but the defending French open champion could not extinguish Henin-Hardenne.
 b. Every Bulgarian astronomer was greeted by someone who knew the scientist as a youth.

Finally, for indefinite descriptions, it can be pointed out that (6a) has a reading which (6b) does not have:

- (6) a. I had lunch with a logician.
 b. Have lunch with a logician!

In a null context (6b) lacks a specific reading because it would be infelicitous to suggest that someone have lunch with a specific logician without giving them enough information to figure out which one. The contrast with (6a) provides intuitive support for the distinction.

I also try to clarify the nature of the problematic specific/referential readings. I relate them to the traditional *de re-de dicto* ambiguities, responding to Kripke's arguments that there is no such relation. I argue (following Kaplan 1978) that specific indefinites and referential definites are not nondescriptive (and hence not directly referential in that sense). However they do share something like the rigid designation property of proper names, where this is best interpreted as involving constant individual concepts, rather than directly designated entities.

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