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# Contextualism and Singular Reference

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## I. Ordinary Language Philosophy and the Contextualist Principle

In the middle of the twentieth-century so-called ‘ordinary language philosophers’ (Austin, Strawson, Wittgenstein, and dozens of others) launched a sustained attack on the views of so-called ‘ideal-language’ philosophers — the founding fathers of analytic philosophy : Frege, Russell, the first Wittgenstein, and the logical positivists. The assault lasted for about twenty years — from the early forties to the late sixties. In his inaugural lecture as the Waynflete Professor of Metaphysical Philosophy in Oxford, Strawson described the debate as a ‘Homeric struggle’ (Strawson 1971: 172). Eventually, ordinary language philosophers lost, and it was their opponents’s disciples — Davidson, Montague, Lewis etc. — who managed to build a semantics for natural language on the foundations laid down by the founders, and who thereby contributed to the development of what is now a thriving discipline in linguistics.

Ordinary language philosophers were not totally defeated, however. Many of their insights were actually taken on board — in particular the following two claims, which have become common ground among students of language:

- The unit of speech is the *illocutionary act*. Assertion is only one illocutionary act among others.
- There is pervasive *context-sensitivity* in natural language : the content carried by a linguistic expression depends upon the context of utterance and is liable to vary if the context changes.

From the standpoint of ordinary language philosophy, the two claims go together. The content carried by an expression is the contribution it makes to the content of the sentence in which the expression occurs ; and for ordinary language philosophers the content of a sentence is nothing but the content of the speech act performed by uttering the sentence in context (see the ‘Contextualist Principle’ below). The sentence type, in abstraction from the context of use, does not have a determinate representational content but abstract grammatical properties which, by themselves, fall short of determining a graspable content. So, instead of focussing on the so-called ‘semantic’ relation between the sentence (type) and the state of affairs it allegedly represents (its truth-conditions), they advocated a perspective shift. They argued that one should take a broader look and consider the ‘total speech act’, because it is only in the context of a speech act that a sentence acquires a determinate content. In other words, the semantics of natural language cannot be dissociated from its pragmatics.

That the semantics of natural language cannot be dissociated from its pragmatics is something that, *in a sense*, has become common ground since Bar-Hillel first advocated a synthesis between the insights of the two camps (Bar-Hillel 1954). What has been widely acknowledged among semanticists since Bar-Hillel is that the compositional assignment of content to natural language expressions must appeal to a context parameter ; that is enough to bring some ‘pragmatics’ into the semantics, in *one* sense of ‘pragmatics’. (For Montague,

following Morris and Carnap, as soon as you bring the context of use into the picture, you're in the field of pragmatics.) But there is a stronger sense, closer to the views of ordinary language philosophers, in which it may be said that the semantics of natural language cannot be dissociated from its pragmatics.

What ordinary language philosophers thought was that content is (primarily) a property of speech acts (or thought acts). Sentences only have content in a derivative manner. They endorsed a pragmaticized version of Frege's context principle :

### *Contextualist Principle*

Only in the context of a speech act does a sentence acquire a determinate content.

In the hands of the successors of Bar-Hillel and Montague, the pragmaticization of semantics is much more limited : because of context-sensitivity, they appeal to a context parameter and only assign contents to sentences in context, but they do so *without* bringing the illocutionary act into the picture, that is, without venturing into 'pragmatics' in the more substantial sense — real pragmatics, as we might call it. They maintain a sharp demarcation between semantics and (real) pragmatics, between the content of the sentence and the content of the speech act.

## **II. The Demise of Ordinary Language Philosophy**

The reason why ordinary language philosophers lost is that their opponents found strong (but, as we shall see, ultimately not compelling) arguments in favour of maintaining the independence of semantics from (real) pragmatics. Two arguments, in particular, played a major role in the downfall of ordinary language philosophy (Recanati 2004 : 154-58).

The first argument is the so-called Frege-Geach point, which appeals to embedding facts. When we embed a sentence within another sentence, it still carries its content. It has to, since (i) otherwise, Modus Ponens would be invalid, and (ii) the content of the embedding sentence compositionally depends upon the content carried by the sentence it embeds. But an embedded sentence is *not* used to perform an illocutionary act of its own. It follows that the content of a sentence is — has to be — independent of the speech act it is used to perform. So the Contextualist Principle must be rejected.

The other argument which was successfully used against ordinary language philosophers is known mostly through the work of Paul Grice. It is actually a counter-argument. Ordinary language philosophers held that sentences do not carry content independently of the speech act they are used to perform. It follows that context-sensitivity is not merely the mark of a particular category of expressions (e.g. indexicals) but should affect *all* expressions, in virtue of the constitutive tie between speech acts and contents. Speech acts are context-bound, so contents, being constitutively tied to speech acts, must be context-bound too. In support of this view, ordinary language philosophers pointed out that, as a matter of fact, sentences do not carry stable truth-conditions across contexts. Thus, in *Introduction to Logical Theory*, Strawson famously pointed out that a simple conjunctive sentence of the form 'P and Q' does not have fixed truth-conditions. Its truth-conditions depend upon the context in a sense which has nothing to do with indexicality. Thus in some contexts a temporal relation between the events described by the conjuncts will be truth-conditionally relevant, but in other contexts not. That is so because truth-conditional content is not a property of the sentence, but a property of the speech act, sensitive to fine features of the context of use.

Grice responded by appealing to the intuitive distinction between what a sentence means and what the speaker means — a distinction which can be maintained even if we hold (as Grice did) that sentence meaning itself can ultimately be analysed in terms of speaker's

meaning (at the so-called ‘meta-semantic’ level). Sentence meaning is a conventional, *stable* property of sentences. That is a property which speaker’s meaning does not have : there is no limit to what the speaker can mean, in a suitable context, by the utterance of a given sentence, so speaker’s meaning is maximally unstable. In between sentence meaning and speaker’s meaning we find ‘what is said’. What is said, Grice tells us, departs from the meaning of the sentence but does so only minimally. Though distinct from linguistic meaning, it remains ‘closely related’ to it (Grice 1989 : 25) and inherits its stability. Grice and his followers accept the following principle :

*Minimality Principle*

The only unstable elements of what is said — the only elements which depend upon the context and can vary — are (i) elements resulting from ‘saturation’, i.e. from contextually assigning values to expressions whose conventional meaning carries a free variable to be contextually instantiated or a slot to be contextually filled (e.g. an indexical), or (ii) elements resulting from disambiguation, i.e. from selecting one of the readings among the distinct readings an expression conventionally has.

All the *other* aspects of utterance meaning that are context-dependent and unstable are deemed external to what is said : they are ‘implicatures’.

In the ordinary language argument from the instability of truth-conditional content, it is *assumed* that the unstable ingredients (e.g. the temporal relation between the events in the conjunction cases) belong to truth-conditional content ; but if we follow Grice and use a notion of truth-conditional content, or ‘what is said’, which minimizes the distance between truth-conditional content and conventional sentence meaning in the manner suggested, then we will treat these unstable ingredients as implicatures external to what is said. This allows truth-conditional content to stabilize instead of varying indefinitely. Grice’s suggestion, then, is that sentences do carry contents (in context), but that these contents are, or may be, distinct from the content of the speech acts the speaker performs. Speech acts contents are richer and more varied because they do not obey the Minimality Principle. They include implicatures in addition to semantic content in the strict and narrow sense. Thanks to the Gricean distinction between what is said (sentence content) and what is meant (speech act content), the ordinary language philosophers’s attack on the traditional view that sentences have content can be resisted, and the Contextualist Principle rejected.

### **III. Re-Enters Contextualism**

Grice was undoubtedly right that we need a distinction between what is said and what is meant. But it does not follow that the ordinary language philosophers were wrong. For it is possible to hold (with them) that sentences only have content in the context of a speech act, while *also* accepting (with Grice) a distinction between what is said and what is meant.

In the eighties a new debate about the extent of context-sensitivity started and developed until, recently, it reached center stage in the philosophy of language. The key issue in the debate is the Minimality Principle. Following Grice, ‘minimalists’ and their allies accept the Minimality Principle, while ‘contextualists’ reject it. The most radical of the contextualists, e.g. Travis and Searle, deny that sentences (or sentences-in-context) have contents that are *both* truth-evaluable and satisfy the Minimality Principle. As Travis puts it,

There is *no* notion of saying satisfying the dual requirements on it that what is said may be true or false (and etc.), and that what is said is tied to the ‘conventional meanings’ of the words used in the way Grice envisages. (Travis 2008 : 25)

In the new debate, the contextualists put forward an *alternative* notion of what is said, one that does not satisfy the Minimality Principle. As a result of that move, truth-conditional content becomes unstable again. Many things which the minimalists take to be implicatures are reintegrated into truth-conditional content with the status of ‘modulations’ in the contextualist framework (Recanati 2004, 2005, 2010). To be sure, there remain genuine implicatures which the contextualists themselves treat as external to truth-conditional content. However context-dependent what is said is (on the contextualist conception), it is always possible for the speaker to mean something over and above what he or she says. But this is not enough to secure the stability of truth-conditional content. To systematically reject the unstable ingredients out of truth-conditional content, as the minimalists are willing to do, it is not sufficient to invoke the said/meant distinction : one needs, in addition, the Minimality Principle as a specific constraint on ‘what is said’. But the contextualists reject that constraint, so it cannot be invoked against them without begging the question.

The Minimalism/Contextualism debate I have just alluded to recapitulates the old debate between ordinary language philosophers and ideal language philosophers. Charles Travis, one of the protagonists in the new debate, was the first to point out the ancestry (Travis 1985). He argued that, contrary to the received view, the contextualist position of ordinary language philosophers is still a live option. He effectively managed to re-open the old debate, despite widespread agreement in the profession that the position had been refuted. In this I think he was entirely right. It was a mistake to think that the contextualist position had been refuted by the two arguments I mentioned above — the Frege-Geach argument and the Gricean argument. Let us see why.

#### IV. What’s Wrong with the Anti-Contextualist Arguments

The first ingredient in the Gricean argument against contextualism is the distinction between what is said and what is meant. As we have just seen, the contextualist can take that distinction on board, so the distinction by itself does not argue against the contextualist position promoted by the ordinary language philosophers. It only shows that the position is not forced upon us — that there *is* an alternative way of analysing the alleged examples of truth-conditional instability. Grice points out that we can analyse, say, the temporal implication in Strawson’s conjunctive example as a conversational implicature, rather than an aspect of what is said. If we choose that analysis, we rescue truth-conditional stability by expelling unstable elements from the core truth-conditional content. But we don’t *have to* choose that analysis — the contextualist analysis (which treats the temporal implication as a form of modulation) is still a live option.

Of course, If we buy the Minimality Principle, the contextualist analysis is no longer an option. But, as we have seen, we can’t use the Minimality Principle in arguing against the contextualist’s claim that truth-conditional content is unstable without begging the question (since the central issue is precisely *whether or not* one should accept the Minimality Principle).

There is another principle which Grice and his followers systematically appealed to in their critique of various contextualist analyses. That principle is Grice’s Modified Occam’s Razor. According to Modified Occam’s Razor, an account in terms of implicature is *preferable* to an account which construes the unstable ingredients as part of what is said. Why is the implicature account preferable, according to the Principle ? Because appealing to implicatures is *more parsimonious* than allowing a more or less indefinite variation in truth-conditions. In earlier work, however, I have shown that Modified Occam’s Razor can do the

work it is intended to do in the argument only if the Minimality Principle is presupposed. So, again, we see that the Gricean argument against contextualism begs the question.

What about the Frege-Geach point? Doesn't it show that we need a sharp distinction between the content of an utterance and the speech act it is used to perform? That is debatable. First, the Frege-Geach argument does not suffice to establish a sharp force/content distinction, as it claims. An alternative account of the embedding data has recently been offered (Hanks forthcoming), compatible with a systematic integration of force and content at every level of embedding. Second, and more relevant to the present discussion, the Frege-Geach rebuttal targets an overly strong construal of the Contextualist Principle. Properly construed, the Contextualist Principle does *not* have the disastrous consequence that the content carried by an embedded sentence depends upon the illocutionary act by performed *by means of that very sentence*. It does entail that the embedded sentence owes its content to *some* speech act it is used to perform, but the speech act in question may be the speech act performed by uttering the *embedding* sentence, i.e. the complex sentence in which the embedded sentence occurs (Recanati 2004 : 154-55). So Geach's refutation of the contextualist principle, on the grounds that e.g. a disjunct in a disjunction carries content but is not used to perform an illocutionary act of its own, is unsuccessful.

### V. Donnellan's Distinction and the Gricean Response

In the late sixties, while Grice was launching his counter-attack on contextualism, another (related) debate started which has continued ever since. The debate concerns the referential use of definite descriptions, but it is more general than that. The issue, again, is that of 'speaker's meaning' and its role in semantics.

In that debate, Keith Donnellan, who started the whole thing when he published his famous paper 'Reference and Definite Descriptions' (1966), defends a position which is in many ways similar to that of the ordinary language philosophers. He maintains that, in referential communication, truth-conditional content depends upon an act of reference performed by the speaker.

Austin and Strawson held that reference is an act; a linguistic act but, arguably, also and fundamentally a mental act. Reference and predication are two 'ancillary acts' that one performs in performing the locutionary act of saying that *a* is *F* (and thereby typically the illocutionary act of *asserting* that *a* is *F*). As far as reference is concerned, Donnellan concurs. He agrees with Strawson that reference is something *people* do. To refer, one must have an object in mind (i.e. one must mentally refer), and make it mutually manifest to the speech protagonists which object that is. After one has referred to an object in this way, one may predicate something of it. If one does, then what is said (the content of the locutionary act jointly constituted by the act of reference and the act of predication) counts as true just in case the object has the predicated property.

In Donnellan's examples, the expressions used to refer are definite descriptions. By using a definite description 'the *F*' in a sentence 'The *F* is *G*', the speaker ostensibly refers to some object he or she has in mind and takes to be *F*, and manages to say something of it, something that will be true or false depending on whether or not that object is *G*.

In some cases (Donnellan's *attributive* uses) the speaker does *not* have any object in mind, or at least, she does not overtly refer to that object. One of Donnellan's examples of an attributive use is: 'The next Republican candidate will be a conservative', in a context in which the protagonists do not know who the next Republican candidate will be. In that sort of case the proposition expressed is not a singular proposition about a particular object, but a general proposition about properties; the same sort of proposition that can be expressed by means of quantifiers. Donnellan follows Russell's theory of descriptions here; but he also

follows Russell in distinguishing descriptions from logically proper names, which do contribute an object. The originality of Donnellan's position is that *he takes referentially used descriptions to behave like logically proper names* : they, too, make a singular contribution, in virtue of the speaker's referential act. What they contribute is the object the speaker ostensively refers to.

This pragmatic approach to reference raises a powerful objection. In so-called 'improper' uses (e.g. when the speaker is *mistaken* and the object s/he refers to does not actually satisfy the description), the truth-conditions are supposed to be singular and to involve the object the speaker has in mind. It follows that one may *say something true* by saying 'the F is G' (when, as a matter of fact, the F is not G), provided *the individual the speaker has in mind* is G. But this is unacceptable. Any theory of English that says that 'The F is G' can be true if a circumstance in which the F is *not* G is unacceptable as a semantic theory. The deliverances of a semantic theory must conform to the disquotational schema: *[S] is true if and only if S*. Donnellan's theory violates this constraint — so the objection goes.

The authors who led the attack on Donnellan's theory (Geach 1962, Grice 1969, Kripke 1977, Davies 1981, Evans 1982 etc.) have offered a diagnostic of his alleged mistake : Donnellan, they say, puts forward a theory of *speaker's reference*, but this is different from semantic reference. When Donnellan talks about the singular truth-conditions of a referential utterance of 'The F is G', what he is talking about is the content of the *speech act* performed by uttering the sentence, not the content of that sentence itself (in that context). Or, to put it in a slightly different framework : there are two propositions, one that is semantically expressed and determines the utterance's truth-conditions, and another one which is communicated without being semantically expressed. Only the latter is singular. Its singularity is irrelevant to the semantics of the sentence. On this view, there is *no* truth-conditional difference between attributive and referential uses. The semantics of the sentence is fixed once for all by the rules of the language. What varies between the referential and the attributive use is the content of the speech act. In one case, but not in the other, one communicates a singular proposition. Donnellan may well be right about the pragmatics of referential communication, but his theory has no consequence for semantics. Semantics may abstract from the referential/attribution distinction.

That this debate is related to the previous two should be obvious. In this regard, it is instructive that the main weapon used against Donnellan by his opponents is Modified Occam's Razor (or Kripke's equivalent parsimony principle). Donnellan has been repeatedly accused of making the sentence 'The F is G' ambiguous, despite his explicit statements to the contrary. The reason for that is that no indexical is in view, so if one presupposes the Minimality Principle (as Donnellan's opponents do), there remain only two possible explanations for the unstable interpretation of the sentence 'The F is G': either the sentence is ambiguous, or the instability of its interpretation is due to an implicature which arises in some contexts but not others (hence the apparent instability) but which does not affect truth-conditional content. Donnellan is taken to offer an explanation of the first type, and Grice and his followers an explanation of the second type. Modified Occam's Razor is then appealed to : since it proscribes the multiplication of linguistic meanings, the most parsimonious explanation is said to be that in terms of implicatures. QED ! — As I pointed out many times (Recanati 1989a, 1989b, 1993, 1994, 2004), this argument based on Modified Occam's Razor does not work. It presupposes the Minimality Principle and thereby begs the question against Donnellan. Donnellan explicitly said that he did not consider the sentence 'The F is G' ambiguous, and that means that he did *not* accept the Minimality Principle: he thought what is said *could* vary cross-contextually even though (i) the sentence is not ambiguous, and (ii) no indexical is in view in terms of which one could explain the variation in truth-conditional

content. Donnellan, in other terms, is best construed as a contextualist, and a contextualist cannot be non-question-beggingly refuted by appealing to the Minimality Principle.

## VI. Singular Reference

Even though Donnellan's view is widely considered to have been refuted, not every one has been convinced by the Gricean approach which rejects the referential/attributional distinction entirely into pragmatics. Other authors follow Donnellan in taking the referential/attributional distinction to be semantically relevant. For them, as for Donnellan, an utterance of 'The F is G' has *distinct truth-conditions* depending on the use that is made of the definite description. In attributional uses a general proposition is expressed; in referential uses the proposition expressed is singular. But these authors, contrary to Donnellan, maintain a sharp distinction between semantics and pragmatics and eschew the objection which Donnellan's own view raises. Improper uses are taken to be *irrelevant to semantics*. So these authors focus on proper uses — cases in which either the speaker has no individual in mind, or the individual she has in mind does satisfy the description.

According to Kaplan *et alii*, a definite description 'the F' may be evaluated (and its referent picked out) either with respect to the *context of use*, or with respect to the *circumstance of evaluation*. In referential uses, the description picks out the individual *a* who is uniquely F in the context of use, and the utterance expresses the singular proposition that *that individual* is G — a proposition that is true with respect to an arbitrary circumstance of evaluation *w* just in case *a* is G in *w* (whether or not *a* is F in *w*). So *a*'s being F — or anyone's being F, for that matter — does not figure among the possible worlds truth-conditions of the utterance: the property of being F is only used, pre-semantically as it were, to determine which individual the speaker is talking about. (The situation is comparable to that of indexicals. The character of an indexical determines its referent in the context of use, and the content of the utterance is a singular proposition about the referent.)

A problem with this view is that it misses one of the most central features of singular reference: its *relational* nature. According to many authors, including Donnellan, what makes it possible to think of an object singularly is the fact that one is contextually related to the object one is thinking about. In perception, we are related to the objects we perceive, and we can form singular thoughts concerning them (even if we are uncertain what they are). In communication too we are related to the objects we hear about, albeit in a more indirect manner (via communicative chains). As Bach puts it, 'the object of a *de re* thought is determined relationally. For something to be the object of a *de re* thought, it must stand in a certain kind of relation to that very thought' (Bach 1987: 12). This is in contrast to descriptive thoughts: 'Since the object of a descriptive thought is determined satisfactorily, the fact that the thought is of that object does not require any connection between thought and object' (id.).

The relations on which singular thoughts are based ('acquaintance relations', as Lewis calls them) are best characterized as *epistemically rewarding* (ER) relations: relations such that, when they hold, they make it possible for the subject to gain information from the object (Recanati 2012). These relations serve as information channels (Lewis 1999: 380-81). To think of an object directly or nondescriptively is to think of it through some such relation. What determines the reference — what one's thought is about — is the relation: the reference is the object to which we stand in the relevant relation, even if that object does not have the properties we take it to have. Donnellan gives the following example:

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. (Donnellan 1966 : 48)

Here the speaker uses the description ‘the man drinking a martini’. Had the description been used attributively, its reference (if any) would be determined ‘satisfactionally’ as whoever uniquely possesses the property of being a man drinking a martini. But the description has been used referentially : the speaker has a certain object in mind, i.e. she stands in some ER relation to some object she wants to say something about. Despite the speaker’s choice of the description to pick out the man in question, what determines her reference is the relevant ER relation : here, the perceptual relation singles out a man (the interesting-looking person the speaker is watching) who as a matter of fact drinks water, not martini.

In contrast, Kaplan, Stalnaker and the proponents of the view under discussion take the referent to be determined satisfactionally : the referent is whatever uniquely satisfies the description in the context of use. To be sure, the descriptive meaning of the description has a very limited role : it only serves to ‘fix the reference’, just as the character of an indexical only serves to ‘fix the reference’ of the expression in context. The content expressed by the utterance is a singular proposition about the relevant individual. Still these authors maintain a satisfactional (descriptivist) approach to reference determination, which Donnellan clearly rejects. (Similarly, Kripke 1980 rejects the idea that the reference of proper names is rigidly ‘fixed’ by means of definite descriptions.)

To sum up, Kaplan, Stalnaker et alii successfully capture the singularity intuition within a two-dimensional framework, but their approach remains descriptivist (satisfactional) and does not acknowledge the importance of relational factors. Relational factors figure centrally in Donnellan’s account of *de re* thought (Donnellan 1977, 2012), and his take on the referential use of definite descriptions is faithful to that general perspective. The problem with Donnellan’s view of referential descriptions is that it faces a seemingly devastating objection, as we have seen. It entails that a sentence ‘The F is G’ can be true even though the F is not G.

How damaging is this objection, actually? The disquotational schema (‘[S] is true iff S’) only applies if the sentence is freed from context-sensitive elements. Since Donnellan, like Strawson, takes the reference of definite descriptions to be somehow context-sensitive, it is not obvious that it can be refuted by appealing to the disquotational schema. Still, I will assume that the objection works, and in the next section I will attempt to protect Donnellan’s view from it. This, I will show, can be done modulo a simple modification of Donnellan’s view — a modification which leaves the basic picture untouched.

## VII. Speaker’s Reference and Semantic Reference : a Reinterpretation

While Kripke, following Grice, draws a distinction between semantic reference and speaker’s reference, Donnellan draws a different distinction between *denotation* and *reference*. The denotation of a description is whatever uniquely satisfies it if anything does and nothing otherwise. The reference, in contrast, is what the subject has in mind (whether or not that object satisfies the description).

How do the two distinctions relate? According to Kripke, what Donnellan calls ‘reference’ is the pragmatic phenomenon of speaker’s reference, which is irrelevant to semantics. What is relevant to semantics is semantic reference, and that, according to Kripke, is nothing but what Donnellan calls denotation. For Donnellan, however, denotation is *never* reference. It is possible to refer to what the description denotes, but denotation, *by itself*, is not reference. Reference results from a mental act, that of deploying a mental file referring to some object in virtue of the ER relation the file is based on. So reference is always *speaker’s* reference. As Donnellan puts it,

Russell's definition of denoting (a definite description denotes an entity if that entity fits the description uniquely) is clearly applicable to either use of descriptions. Thus whether or not a description is used referentially (...), it may have a denotation. Hence, denoting and referring, as I have explicated the latter notion, are distinct... If one tried to maintain that they are the same notion, one result would be that a speaker might be referring to something without knowing it. If someone said, for example, in 1960, before he had any idea that Mr Goldwater would be the Republican nominee in 1964, 'The Republican candidate for president in 1964 will be a conservative,' (perhaps on the basis of an analysis of the views of party leaders) the definite description here would *denote* Mr Goldwater. But would we wish to say that the speaker had referred to, mentioned, or talked about Mr Goldwater? I feel these terms would be out of place. (Donnellan 1966 : 54-55)

Donnellan's position is vulnerable because of its treatment of improper uses, i.e. cases in which the speaker's reference is *not* the denotation of the description. Donnellan argues that what the speaker says may be true in such situations, if the object the speaker has in mind has the property the speaker ascribes to it. Imagine that the unique F (the denotation of the description 'the F') does not instantiate property G, while the object *a* which the speaker has in mind does (it is G). The speaker says 'The F is G' because he (mistakenly) believes *a* to be the F. This mistake, according to Donnellan, only affects the means of expression, not what is expressed. Despite the mistake, the speaker's utterance is true: it expresses a singular proposition about *a*, to the effect that it is G, and *a* is G, in the envisaged circumstances — so the utterance is true. But this immediately raises the objection that 'the F is G' cannot be *true* if the F is not G.

Donnellan's theory can easily be revised so as to avoid the objection. The revision I recommend is to *import* the semantic reference/speaker's reference distinction into Donnellan's own framework (with a different interpretation than it receives in Kripke's Gricean framework).

In improper uses, I suggest, there is *no* semantic reference, so the damaging consequence no longer follows: if the description fails to refer semantically, the sentence as a whole can't take the value 'true'. Still, the essentials of Donnellan's picture are preserved, on the view I recommend: the distinction between reference and denotation is intact, instead of being blurred as on Kripke's picture (Table 1).

The Kripke picture:

Semantic reference (= denotation) vs Speaker's reference

The revised Donnellan picture:

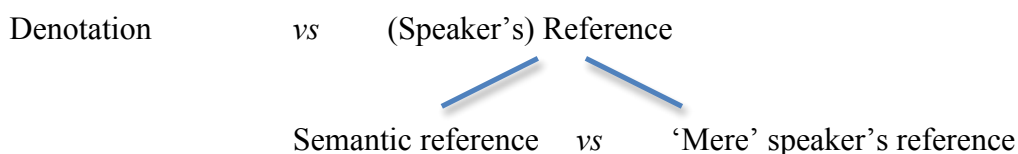


Table 1: The Kripke picture and the revised Donnellan picture

The revised Donnellan picture draws a contrast between two kinds of (speaker's) reference. In some cases the speaker's act of reference is compatible with the constraints imposed by the semantics of the sentence, and in other cases it isn't. This corresponds to the distinction between semantic reference and 'mere' speaker's reference.

Consider, for illustration, the case of pronouns. 'She' sets a constraint: the referent must be female. If you say 'she' while ostensibly referring to a male individual, the constraint hasn't been satisfied. In such cases, a presupposition is violated, and linguists say that the sentence's semantic value is affected: the constituent 'she' has no semantic value in such a case. A pronoun takes a value that results from a free contextual assignment, but the assignment has to satisfy the presuppositions carried by the pronoun (otherwise the value is undefined).

The same thing arguably holds for definite descriptions: the speaker's reference needs to satisfy the presuppositions carried by the description. So we can characterize a notion of 'semantic reference' in such a way that there is *no* semantic reference (no semantic value) in so-called improper uses, i.e. when the presuppositions carried by the description are not satisfied. This gives us three varieties of use, instead of merely two. In addition to the nonreferential (attributive) use, there are two types of referential use: those in which the speaker's reference achieves the status of 'semantic reference' because the presuppositions are satisfied (proper uses), and those in which the speaker's reference is 'mere' speaker's reference and does not achieve semantic status (improper uses).

On this view there are two constraints which the semantic referent of a definite description must satisfy :

1. It must be the referent, and therefore must satisfy Donnellan's epistemological constraint on reference: the subject must have that object in mind etc. Being the denotation is not enough.
2. To be the *semantic* referent an additional constraint applies : the object must satisfy the description — it must be the denotation.

In this framework speaker's reference is primary and semantic reference is parasitic on it. The semantic reference is the speaker's reference if the speaker's reference meets the semantic condition, and nothing otherwise. It follows that the semantic content carried by the utterance depends, via the semantic value of its referential constituent, upon the speech act which the speaker performs (and more specifically, upon the ancillary act of reference). This, I repeat, is a recognizably contextualist position.

### **VIII. Is All Reference Speaker's Reference?**

Gunnar Björnsson has objected to the view I have just sketched that it is too radical. In the case of pronouns and demonstratives, an act of mental reference is admittedly needed to 'complete' the content of a sentence through what Burge calls an 'application'. Some kind of completion is also needed when a definite description is incomplete. But not all referring expressions are like pronouns, demonstratives, or incomplete definite descriptions. The reference of a *pure indexical* like 'I' or 'yesterday' is fixed automatically (in context) by a linguistic rule. In the case of *complete definite descriptions*, the semantic reference is set to be the denotation. So we could accept the relevance of mental files and speaker's reference for pronouns, demonstratives and incomplete definite description, but not for the other cases. For the other cases appealing to mental files and speaker's reference is superfluous; there is a reference-fixing mechanism at work which is *independent* of speaker's reference.

As I pointed out, however, the revised Donnellan view accords well with the contemporary practice of mainstream linguists. At least as far as pronouns are concerned, they do not draw a sharp distinction between demonstratives and pure indexicals, but take the pure indexicals to be a limiting case. A third person pronoun like ‘he’ or ‘she’ semantically refers to the speaker’s reference, whatever it is, provided it satisfies the (meager) presupposition carried by the pronoun. In the case of a pure indexical like the first person pronoun ‘I’ the presupposition is much more specific — so specific that it is uniquely identifying. The referent of ‘I’ must be the speaker (the person making the utterance). Here, in contrast to the third person case, the presupposition is satisfied by a unique object. The general rule for the interpretation of pronouns still applies, however: the semantic reference is the value of the contextual assignment, provided it satisfies the presupposition.

If, with ‘I’, the speaker refers to an object which does not satisfy the presupposition, the occurrence of ‘I’ fails to semantically refer. Example: watching a film in which I (wrongly) think I recognize myself, I say, pointing to the character on the screen which I take to be myself: ‘Look, my pants are on fire!’ I refer to the character on the screen, which I take to be myself, and since that individual (whose pants are on fire) is not myself, the presupposition carried by ‘I’ is not satisfied and the occurrence fails to refer semantically. Schlenker gives a similar example involving the pronoun ‘you’:

Suppose that I am pointing towards one person (say, to my right) while talking to another person (to my left). If I then utter *You are nice* with emphasis on *you* and a correlative pointing gesture, the result is decidedly odd — in the same way as if, pointing towards John, I were to say: *She is nice*. This is a welcome result: a presupposition failure is predicted because the person that is pointed to is not an addressee of the speech act (similarly, *she is nice* is odd when pointing to John because *she* carries a presupposition that it denotes a female individual). (Schlenker 2005 : 162)

Insofar as the presupposition carried by pure indexicals is uniquely identifying, they have a denotation, in Donnellan’s sense: the denotation is the object which satisfies the descriptive (presuppositional) content of the pronoun. But we can maintain Donnellan’s distinction between denotation and reference, and generalize what linguists say of pronouns to all referential expressions.

Consider the case of Rip van Winkle. He goes to bed one evening (on day **d**) and wakes up twenty years later. He does not know that he has slept for more than one night, so he thinks of **d** as ‘yesterday’. Now which day does he refer to when he says ‘Yesterday was a nice day’ ? Suppose the day immediately preceding Rip’s awakening was not a nice day (of course, Rip does not know, since he was asleep). Is Rip’s utterance, ‘Yesterday was a nice day’, true or false ? In the Grice-Kripke framework, it is false, simply because the previous day (the semantic reference of ‘yesterday’) was not a nice day. Whichever mental file comes into the picture only provides speaker’s reference in addition to the semantic reference determined by rule (the previous day). On the revised Donnellan view, the *denotation* of Rip’s use of ‘yesterday’ is the day before his utterance, but the *reference* — what Rip himself refers to and describes as a nice day — seems to be **d**, the last waking day he remembers. Since **d** is not the previous day, the presupposition carried by ‘yesterday’ is not satisfied, and the speaker’s reference fails to achieve semantic status. The utterance should therefore be said to be neither true nor false.

It is not obvious, however, that Rip himself speaker-refers to **d** when he utters ‘yesterday’. It all depends on which sort of mental file Rip is deploying. If it’s what Evans calls a ‘memory demonstrative’, it refers to the object which is the source of the memory

information in the file. That is **d**. Since **d** does not satisfy the presupposition carried by ‘yesterday’, the reference is mere speaker’s reference: it does not achieve semantic status. But if the file Rip associates with ‘yesterday’ is a more specialised, fine-grained file in which one stores information specifically from the previous day (a *yesterday*-file, as it were), it will refer through the specific ER relation on which the file is based. Since that ER relation is the relation between a day and a thought episode which holds just in case the thought episode occurs on the following day, a file based on that ER relation will refer to the day preceding the thought episode to which the deployment of the file contributes. So it will refer to the previous day (not to **d**), despite the fact that the memory information mistakenly stored into the file derives from **d**. The utterance ‘yesterday was a nice day’ now turns out to be false.

Whatever we think about this particular case, the revised Donnellan view links reference (including semantic reference) to the deployment of a mental file in the subject’s mind. Verdicts about semantic reference depend upon prior verdicts about mental reference. In this framework, the whole issue of reference is moved from the linguistic level to the conceptual level, where it belongs.

## IX. Conclusion

In the first half of this paper in honour of Charles Travis, I argued that the Contextualist Principle has not been refuted. Travis made the point forty years ago, and he was right : contextualism is still a live option. In the second half, I interpreted Donnellan’s theory as a case for contextualism, and I defended it against a widespread objection, by incorporating the speaker’s reference/semantic reference distinction into his framework.

Donnellan’s approach illustrates what I take to be the right strategy for contextualism : arguments for the Contextualist Principle should be sought at the level of the ancillary acts (such as reference) on which, it can be held, semantic content depends. I take Travis to have applied the same strategy. Most of his contextualist arguments pertain to the other main sublocutionary act, namely predication.

That reference is fundamentally relational and (therefore) context-sensitive is an old view that traces back to Peirce, and which has regularly surfaced in contemporary philosophy. But, with rare exceptions, twentieth-century philosophy of language has been guilty of *ignoring* the context sensitivity of predication. Travis’ work is one of the few exceptions. His examples, inspired by those of Austin and Wittgenstein, suggest that lexical items of the predicative variety do not *encode* ready-made properties and relations waiting to be ascribed to the arguments of the predicate. The properties and relations which lexical items of the predicative type contribute to content vary with context. As Travis put it in his first book,

Predicate expressions can be responsible for variations in what is said in much the same way as referring noun phrases. To bring out the parallel, we can say that like referring noun phrases predicate expressions refer, but where the noun phrases refer to objects, the predicates refer to properties [which] vary from occasion to occasion.  
(Travis 1975 : 61)

I have argued elsewhere that frame semantics, as developed by Fillmore and his colleagues, supports Travis’ claim that ‘predicates refer in contextually variable ways to properties’ (Travis 1975 : 62). Be that as it may, Travis’ contextualist idea parallels Donnellan’s. Predication, like reference, is a speech act, and semantic content depends on it.

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