Donnellan, “Reference and Definite Descriptions”

1. Donnellan’s Target

Donnellan distinguishes between two uses of definite descriptions: the *attributive use* and the *referential use*. Both kinds of uses of definite descriptions involve denotation—a definite description denotes an entity if that entity fits the description uniquely. But only one of them involves referring. That is, denotation is not the same as referring.

Against Russell: Russell ignores the referential use of definite descriptions (even though, in fact, many of the things Russell says about logically proper names can be said of the referential use of definite descriptions—see section IX of Donnellan).

Against Strawson: While Strawson recognizes a referential use, he appears to think (a) that you can’t have two different uses of a definite description in the same sentence, and (b) that the type of sentence determines the type of use the definite description in the sentence will be put to. Donnellan thinks you can’t know the use without knowing the particular circumstances of use (and the intentions of the user—see section VII of Donnellan):

“Strawson’s view, I believe, allows us to speak of the referential function of a definite description in a sentence even when it is not being used. This, I hope to show, is a mistake” (266).

Two false assumptions shared by Russell and Strawson:
1. We can know how a definite description functions in a sentence without knowing its particular circumstances of use (see above).
2. When the implication (Russell) or presupposition (Strawson) of a definite description—that there is something that fits the description (e.g., there is a king of France)—is false (i.e., there isn’t a KoF), the truth value of what the speaker says is affected—for Russell, it is made false, for Strawson, it has no truth value.

2. The Distinction: Referential v. Attributive Uses

**Attributive:** A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so.

So, if I say ‘Smith’s murderer is insane’ and I use ‘Smith’s murderer’ attributively, I am saying of whoever killed Smith that he or she is insane. I do this even if I have no idea who it is. In these cases the definite description might be said to occur essentially.

**Referential:** A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an assertion 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.

So if I use ‘Smith’s murderer is insane’ referentially, then I already have somebody in mind (say, Jones) who I think fits that description, and I intend to say of that somebody that he or she is insane. I refer to Jones even if he is innocent, and even if you know he’s innocent, provided you know that I think he’s the murderer. Here the definite description does not occur essentially, but instead is merely one tool for doing a certain job—calling attention to a person or thing—and in general any other device for doing the same job, another description or a name, would do as well.

In both cases, we presuppose or imply that there is a murderer of Smith when we use ‘Smith’s murderer’.

But what if there isn’t a murderer of Smith? (Say, Smith committed suicide, or it was an accident, or he’s not really dead.) That is, what if the presupposition is false? There are different results for the different uses:

1. **Attributive:** we have failed to say of anyone that he or she is insane.
2. **Referential:** we could still say of Jones that he is insane.
In both cases there is the presupposition that someone (or something) fits the description, but in referential uses there is also the presupposition that it is a particular someone or something.

3. The Nature of the Distinction: The Beliefs of the Speaker?

Perhaps the difference between the attributive use and the referential use lies in the beliefs of the speaker—in the case of the referential use, I believe that some particular thing fits the description and in the attributive use I do not.

I can use a definite description referentially to refer to a person/thing who I do not believe fits that description. E.g. I say of the usurper ‘Is the king in the countinghouse?’

Similarly, I can use a definite description attributively and believe that some particular person/thing fits the description. E.g. I say ‘Smith’s murderer is insane’ and I believe that Jones killed Smith. But I go on to give reasons why anyone who fits the description ‘Smith’s murderer’ would have been insane.

Conclusion: a use of a definite description is not automatically a function of the beliefs of the speaker—in particular, whether or not the speaker has in mind a particular person/thing.

4. ‘Presupposition and ‘No Fit’

Referential: When a definite description is used referentially, there is the presumption that the speaker believes something fits the description—namely, that to which she refers—because otherwise people wouldn’t recognize what she was referring to.

Attributive: When a definite description is used attributively, however, the presumption follows from the fact that if there isn’t something that fits the description, then the speaker will have failed to say something true (or give an order that can be followed, or ask a question that can be answered).

5. Critique of Russell and Strawson

Both Russell and Strawson give only one account of the presupposition involved in the use of definite descriptions.

Russell: Russell’s definition of denoting (a definite description denotes an entity if that entity fits the description uniquely) applies to both uses of a definite description.

Donnellan’s critique:

The attributive use cannot succeed in referring. For example:

The Republican candidate for president in 1964 will be a conservative.

Suppose this sentence is uttered before it is known that it would be Goldwater. Here Goldwater is denoted, but not referred to, because you can’t refer to someone or something without knowing who or what it is.

Strawson: Strawson says three things:

1. If someone asserts that the F is G, he has not made a true or false statement if there is no F.
2. If there is no F then the speaker has failed to refer to anything.
3. The reason he has said nothing true or false is because he has failed to refer.

Donnellan’s critique:

1. This is possibly true of the attributive use, but not necessarily of the referential use, because you can truly assert Jones is insane even if Smith was not murdered.
2. This is false: you can refer to Jones.
3. Doesn’t really give the reason attributive use results in neither truth nor falsity, and although it is true of the referential use, it is only true in bizarre circumstances where I mistake nothing at all for something (case d on 272).

“I conclude, then, that neither Russell’s nor Strawson’s theory represents a correct account of the use of definite descriptions—Russell’s because it ignores altogether the referential use, Strawson’s because it fails to make the
distinction between the referential and the attributive and mixes together truths about each (together with some things that are false)” (272).