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## The attributive use and Russell's paradigm

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Wojciech Rostworowski

## **The Attributive Use and Russell's Paradigm**

Keith Donnellan's distinction between attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions has provoked many discussions. Apparently, at the centre of these debates lies the question of whether the distinction somewhat undermines Russell's theory of definite descriptions. Philosophers sharply disagree with each other about the referential use, but, in general, they agree that the Russellian analysis is compatible with the attributive use.<sup>1</sup> Loosely speaking, the received view is that attributive descriptions are just 'Russellian' descriptions.

In my paper, I want to challenge this view. I am going to argue that the Russellian analysis is inadequate for attributive uses. Firstly, I present some arguments which are upshots of more general issues raised against the Russellian treatment of definite descriptions in general. These are arguments against 'the uniqueness-reading' and against 'the existential reading', as I call them. Secondly, I present my own argument against the Russellian account of the attributive use, which is based on some observations concerning inferences involving sentences in their attributive use. The course of my argument will be to show that the Russellian analysis of such sentences cannot explain intuitive validity of some kind of inference in which they occur.

### **I**

Let me start with explaining the main notion in question, that is the attributive use of descriptions.<sup>2</sup> According to Donnellan (1966: 285), I use a description attribu-

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<sup>1</sup> There are, of course, a few exceptions like Wettstein (1981). Still, most philosophers definitely think that if there are any discrepancies between Russell's account and what Donnellan says about the attributive use, they are inessential.

<sup>2</sup> From now on, by speaking of 'descriptions', I will have definite descriptions in mind.

tively in an assertion when I state something about ‘whatever’ or ‘whoever’ who has the attribute from the description. Schematically, an utterance of a sentence of the form “The  $F$  is  $G$ ” is attributive if it expresses a thought equivalent to “*whatever* is the  $F$  is  $G$ ” (“the  $F$ , whatever it is, is  $G$ ” etc.).<sup>3</sup> In other terms, an utterance of a sentence with a description counts as ‘attributive’ if it can be naturally paraphrased with a ‘whatever’-clause.

Donnellan illustrates the attributive use with his example of Smith’s murder. Suppose I find Smith’s body brutally mutilated. Due to the manner of this killing (and perhaps the fact that Smith was an innocent man), I exclaim: “The murderer of Smith is insane”. What I express by saying this can be very naturally paraphrased as “The murderer of Smith, whoever he is, is insane”. The use of the sentence is clearly attributive.

Donnellan’s example may suggest that the attributive use of “The  $F$  is  $G$ ” is simply a case in which the speaker does not know (nor has any presumption of) what the  $F$  exactly is (hence, one may conclude, the clause with “whatever” occurs). However, as Donnellan emphasizes, it is not so. I can have a belief that a particular object fits the description “the  $F$ ” and, nevertheless, make an attributive assertion about the  $F$ . The philosopher illustrates such a situation with a modified example of the trial of Jones (which was primarily supposed to illustrate a different use of descriptions — the referential one). Imagine that we are at a trial and that Jones was pronounced guilty for murdering Smith. Suppose that I say “The murderer of Smith is insane”. In these circumstances, my assertion would naturally be taken as one about Jones. However, imagine that when I am asked to justify my opinion, instead of indicating Jones’ strange behaviour in the dock, I go on to reason that *anyone* who was capable of committing such a horrible crime must be insane. This means, according to Donnellan (1966: 290), that my use of the description “the murderer...” was, in fact, attributive.

As we may conclude from this example, the attributive use of “The  $F$  is  $G$ ” is not a case in which the speaker does not have a belief that a particular  $x$  is the  $F$ , but a case in which such speaker’s belief (if he has one) is *not important* for his thinking that the  $F$  is  $G$ . In the attributive use, the speaker rather bases her opinion on some general considerations. Hence, the “whatever”-clause in a paraphrase of an attributive assertion is not supposed to stress the fact that the speaker does not know what the  $F$  is; rather it is an emphasis of a conviction that having the property of  $G$ -hood does not depend on any properties specific to the actual object which is  $F$ , but it merely depends on having the attribute of  $F$ -hood.

Having explained what an attributive assertion is, I will recall the target of my critique. As I have noted, philosophers have mostly proposed interpreting attributive assertions according to Russell’s paradigm. Their position can be put as the following thesis:

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<sup>3</sup> For the sake of brevity, I will call such an utterance an ‘attributive assertion’.

- (T) An attributive assertion of "The  $F$  is  $G$ " expresses the proposition:  
 $\exists x (Fx \ \& \ \forall y (Fy \rightarrow x=y) \ \& \ Gx)$

For the sake of brevity, let me call the proposition formulated in the symbolic language a 'Russellian proposition'. Shortly speaking, (T) claims that an attributive assertion expresses a Russellian proposition. So, according to (T), such an assertion expresses the truth if and only if there is only one object which satisfies the description and this object also satisfies the predicate.<sup>4</sup> Let me now present the objections to this view.

## II

As I have noted at the beginning, I will start with arguments which are corollaries of some general issues raised against Russell's account of descriptions. These are arguments against the existential reading and against the uniqueness-reading, respectively.

### The argument against the existential reading

The issue was originally raised by Strawson (1950). He strongly rejects Russell's idea that sentences of the form "The  $F$  is  $G$ " are not, in fact, logically subject-predicate sentences, but complex existential constructions. Strawson's argument against such an idea appeals to the intuition that an assertion of "The  $F$  is  $G$ " is truth-valueless if there is no  $F$ , while on the Russellian reading, it must be simply false. To put it in other terms, according to Strawson, the existence of the object which is  $F$  is presupposed by an assertion of "The  $F$  is  $G$ ", *but not stated by* such an utterance.

Donnellan shares the Strawsonian intuition to some extent. Certainly, he shares the conviction that the lack of existence of the object  $F$  does not imply that each utterance of "The  $F$  is  $G$ " must be false. In particular, it can be true when the utterance is referential, as Donnellan maintains. However, he also hesitates a little as far as the attributive use is concerned. That is to say, there are some passages in (Donnellan's 1966) in which he suggests that attributive assertions have the Strawsonian truth-conditions rather than the Russellian ones:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Theory (T) has, in fact, two components. Not only does it characterize the truth-conditions of the proposition expressed in the attributive assertion, but it also defines its logical form — it takes it to be a complex existential statement. However, it is worth noting that the view that the Russellian proposal captures the logical form of "The  $F$  is  $G$ " (in any use) is less common than the view that it captures its truth-conditions. In fact, several accounts withdraw the claim about logical form (e.g. Neale 1990, Sainsbury 2004) while keeping the claim about truth-conditions. In the whole critique of (T), I will concentrate rather on the issue of truth-conditions; nevertheless, one can take the subsequent objections as a rejection of the claim about the logical form as well.

<sup>5</sup> There are, of course, passages in which Donnellan suggests that Russellian reading is appropriate for attributive assertions. All in all, he leaves it as an open question which theory — that of

Generalizing from this case, we can say, I think, that there are two uses of sentences of the form, “The  $\phi$  is  $\psi$ .” In the first [the attributive] one, if nothing is the  $\phi$  then nothing has been said to be  $\psi$  (Donnellan 1966: 287).

In both cases we have used the predicate “is insane,” but in the first case [the attributive one], if there is no murderer, there is no person of whom it could be correctly said that we attributed insanity to him (Donnellan 1966: 286).

And finally,

Proposition (1) [“If someone asserts that the  $\phi$  is  $\psi$  he has not made a true or false statement if there is no  $\phi$ ”] is possibly true of the attributive use (1) (Donnellan 1966: 295).

In sum, Donnellan seems to entertain the idea that an attributive assertion is — along Strawsonian lines — not false when there is no object that satisfies the description. Paradoxically, the attributive use seems to have more in common with Strawson’s notion of referring than the referential use does (Donnellan 1966, section VI).

Let me now stipulate how the argument against existential reading exactly goes. It can be put as a two-premised reasoning:

- (P1) If nothing is  $F$ , an attributive assertion of “The  $F$  is  $G$ ” is neither false nor true.
- (P2) According to (T), an attributive assertion is false when nothing fits the description.
- (C) Hence, (T) must be wrong.

The main premise of the reasoning, (P1), appeals to the Strawsonian intuition in the case of attributive assertions. As Donnellan has suggested, the intuition seems to be, indeed, quite strong in such cases. Let me note that if an assertion of “The  $F$  is  $G$ ” (where “the  $F$ ” is empty) is referential, we are inclined to say that, nevertheless, something true or false is stated, depending on whether the referred object  $x$  satisfies  $G$ -hood. By contrast, when someone uses “The  $F$  is  $G$ ” attributively, nothing can be indicated as the intended referent of the speaker. Hence, if “the  $F$ ” is empty, there is no candidate for an object to which the predicate “is  $G$ ” could apply and, in consequence, there is nothing with respect to which we could say that  $G$ -hood is being ascribed truly or falsely. That is why we feel that nothing true or false is actually said in this case.

On the other hand, we should note that Donnellan (1968) suggests a possibility that an attributive assertion with an empty description sometimes expresses the *truth*. He means contexts in which, although there is no object satisfying the description, there is still something which satisfies a relatively close description. Donnellan calls such a case (after his critic McKay) a ‘near miss’. Again, it can be illustrated with the example of Smith’s murderer. Suppose that Smith died of a heart-attack, but he was

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Russell or that of Strawson — is better for attributive assertions.

tortured before by an assailant and the poor condition of his body (which makes me exclaim "The murderer of Smith is insane") is due to the torture. Moreover, let us assume that the assailant is indeed insane. "Are we prepared to say flatly", as Donnellan (1968: 209) asks, that by saying "The murderer of Smith is insane" I did not state the truth?

I do not aim to answer this question in my article. I only want to note that if we agree with the hypothesis that I *did* state the truth in the aforementioned case (since I 'scored' a near-miss and predicated insanity of the assailant), we are in conflict with (T) again, although we actually reject (P1). Nevertheless, we can simply reformulate (P1) in order to capture the case of a 'near miss':

(P1\*) If nothing is *F*, an attributive assertion of "the *F* is *G*" is *not always false*.

Of course, the argument against existential reading still works when we decide to replace (P1) with (P1\*).

### The argument against the uniqueness-reading

Again, the argument is a corollary of the Strawsonian objection. Apart from the existential reading of sentences of the form "The *F* is *G*", Strawson also denies the Russellian claim that the definite article implies uniqueness of the object satisfying the description. His argument goes roughly as follows: competent speakers of English commonly use the definite article with descriptive phrases which are true about more than one object (his famous examples are: "The table is covered with books", "The whale struck the ship"). If the Russellian analysis is correct all subject-predicate sentences containing such phrases are false; however, this conclusion seems to be absurd.

Let me elaborate on this objection with respect to attributive assertions. It has been recognized that we can use 'incomplete' descriptions attributively (from now on, I will use the expression "incomplete descriptions" to mean definite descriptions which are satisfied by more than one object). For example, when I find Smith's body brutally mutilated, instead of saying "The murderer of Smith is insane" I might simply state "The murderer is insane". My statement would be, no doubt, correct and it might be intuitively true. However, on Russellian grounds, it must be false, no matter what the mental condition of Smith's murderer is.

Generalizing our example, we can thus formulate the argument against uniqueness-reading as follows:

(P1) Attributive assertions with incomplete descriptions are correctly formulated statements which may be true or false.

(P2) According to (T), each attributive assertion with an incomplete description must be false.

(C) Hence, (T) is wrong.

Strawson's general objection has raised many discussions. Many philosophers think that incomplete descriptions pose a major threat to Russell's theory, but others assume that they do not. The latter theorists have given several responses to the question of how Russell's theory can be saved from the absurd consequence that saying something with a non-uniquely denoting description is always false; or at least they have attempted to reduce the absurdity of this conclusion in some way. Since the debate has mainly concentrated on referential descriptions, I will skip it. I only want to mention the main strategies for dealing with this problem and raise doubts about whether they can be applied in the case of attributive assertions.

A response to the problem of incomplete descriptions on the Russellian account may be semantic or pragmatic. The former one, in turn, includes two approaches: the 'explicit', and, the 'implicit' one, as Neale (1990) calls them. Both semantic approaches reject (P2) while retaining Russellian theory at the same time. The explicit semantic approach postulates that an incomplete description "the *F*" is elliptical for some other description "the *F*\*" which uniquely denotes an object. However, as Wettstein (1981) and Devitt (2004) have demonstrated, this strategy fails in general and, in particular, in the case of attributive assertions. Briefly, as Devitt notes, it cannot be successful because of the problem of 'principled basis' and 'unwanted ambiguity'.<sup>6</sup> Hence, one may turn to the implicit approach. According to this view, an incomplete description "the *F*" is a contextually sensitive quantifier phrase whose domain is somehow *restricted* by the context of uttering "The *F* is *G*" — in is such a way that there is always only one thing which is *F* in the domain. Again, this approach does not succeed in the case of attributive assertions. As Ludlow and Segal noted (2004), the attributive assertion "The murderer of Smith is insane" — as made when looking at mutilated Smith's body — intuitively expresses something true provided that Smith was killed by the group of people who are all insane. Since the context cannot determine one particular person as Smith's murderer (that is to say, the domain contains several persons who satisfy the description "Smith's murder"), the sentence is still literally false according to the Russellian analysis.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For further explanation, see Devitt 2004. The philosopher clearly states that the two issues — principled basis and unwanted ambiguity — are problems for attributive descriptions as well as referential ones (2004: 301).

<sup>7</sup> Ludlow and Segal thus proposed a quantificational theory different from Russell's original proposal, which eliminates 'the uniqueness-condition' from the interpretation of "The *F* is *G*". Namely, in their view, "The *F* is *G*" and "A/an *F* is *G*" are semantically equivalent — no matter whether it is being used referentially or non-referentially — and they express merely an existential statement:  $\exists x (Fx \ \& \ Gx)$ . On the other hand, Devitt, who rejects the explicit approach in general, thinks that the implicit approach might work in the case of attributive assertions.

Finally, we may take a pragmatic approach to the problem of incomplete descriptions on Russell's account. The strategy is to accept (P2) and to attempt to explain the counter-intuitiveness of this premise by appealing to the general fact that by asserting false sentences, speakers can *communicate* true propositions. In particular, by saying a literally false sentence "The table is covered with books", I can convey a true thought that *this* table is covered with books. In my opinion, the strategy is of no help in the case of attributive assertions. Again, the aforementioned example with several Smith's murderers poses a major threat to it. First of all, in the circumstances of saying "The murderer of Smith is insane", I cannot mean one particular murderer among Smith's murderers, since I might even not suspect that several people have killed Smith. I cannot thus convey a thought that one particular murderer among others is insane. Hence, there is no true proposition communicated in this case, contrary to the postulate of the pragmatic approach. Secondly, according to Ludlow and Segal, what is communicated by my utterance of "The murderer of Smith is insane" is the thought that *there is only one* murderer of Smith.<sup>8</sup> If so, the communicated proposition is false and, once again, we cannot explain the intuition that my statement expresses something true.

A hope for the pragmatic approach would be to indicate some true proposition which I communicate by my utterance of "The murderer of Smith is insane" in the given example. For instance, it may be the proposition that there exists an insane murderer of Smith. However, this solution seems to be ad hoc. The pragmatic approach must describe the mechanism of how the communicated proposition is generated by a particular attributive utterance of a given sentence. Specifically, it should explain why using a description with the definite article, "the murderer of Smith," I aim to communicate a purely existential proposition that the set of insane Smith's murderers is not empty. However, in my view, it is hard to give a sensible and not ad hoc answer to this question. In addition, one may still regard the acceptance of (P2) as a very counter-intuitive part of the pragmatic approach, however convincing the pragmatic explanation it offers would be. That is to say, one may not want to agree that the statement of "The *F* is *G*" must be always literally false when "the *F*" is incomplete.

### III

In this section, I want to raise an objection against (T) which, as far as I know, has not been suggested in the literature on descriptions. It concerns the fact that some inferences involving attributive assertions are hard to account for on the basis of (T). That is, my argument against (T) will run as follows: certain inferences based on attributive assertions are intuitively valid. However, they would not be valid provided

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<sup>8</sup> It is because they think that the use of the definite article somehow implies 'uniqueness' (although it does not express it semantically). That is to say, they think that an utterance of "The *F* is *G*" conveys a thought that there is only one *F* which is *G* (2004: 424).



that an attributive assertion merely expresses a Russellian proposition. So an attributive assertion does not express Russellian proposition; hence (T) is wrong.

Firstly, let me indicate what type of inferences involving attributive assertions I have in mind. Imagine that two detectives have somehow discovered that Smith's murderer is left-handed, but they do not know the identity of the murderer, so they are deliberating who he might be. One of them suspects Jones, but the other does not believe that Jones is guilty and argues for his innocence. Suppose that the second detective says:

Jones did not kill Smith. Remember that the murderer of Smith, whoever he may be, is left-handed. Hence, if Jones had been the murderer, he must have been left-handed. But I know that Jones is right-handed. Thus Jones is not the murderer.

The argument given by the second detective seems to constitute a perfectly correct reasoning. In particular, the following step must be correct:

1.           The murderer of Smith, whoever he may be, is left-handed.
2.           Hence, if Jones had been the murderer of Smith, he must have been left-handed.

The premise is, undoubtedly, attributive and the conclusion is a counterfactual. The example illustrates thus that an inference from an attributive assertion of "The *F* is *G*" to a counterfactual like "If *x* had been the *F*, *x* would have been *G*" is intuitively valid.

This type of inference can easily be illustrated by another example. Suppose that a chess tournament took place and Smith won the final competition. Since the competition was very tough, someone exclaims:

3.           The winner of this chess tournament, whoever he may be, deserves a really big prize.<sup>9</sup>

Then, he adds:

4.           So, if I had won, I would have deserved a big prize.

Again, the reasoning of the speaker is intuitively valid. Both examples (1)–(2), (3)–(4) thus show that the proposition expressed by an attributive assertion entails a respective counterfactual in some way.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The assertion is supposed to be purely attributive, not about Smith in particular (that is why I introduce the "whoever may be"-clause).

<sup>10</sup> In this section, I presume that counterfactuals have propositional content, that is to say, at least in some contexts, they can be evaluated as 'true' or 'false'. However, I am aware of the fact that this is not a presumption everyone agrees with.

Now, it is quite obvious that the aforementioned inferences are not valid provided that attributive assertions express Russellian propositions. Firstly, it is worth noting that particular semantics of counterfactuals do not validate implications of the form: "If there is  $x$  such that  $x$  is uniquely  $F$  and  $x$  is  $G$ , then if it *were* the case that  $a$  is uniquely  $F$ , then it *would* be the case that  $a$  is  $G$ ". As a consequence, if we take some of these theories to be adequate, we need to conclude that an inference from a statement expressing a Russellian proposition to the given counterfactual cannot be valid. Secondly, and more importantly, we can think of quite intuitive counterexamples to the claim that such an inference would be valid. Let me elaborate this.

Let us concentrate on the example of a sentence which indisputably expresses a Russellian proposition. For instance, suppose that I have found out that my friend Smith, who won a chess tournament, has ten coins in his pocket at the moment. Imagine now that I formulate the following sentence:

5.            There is only one person who won the chess tournament and this person has ten coins in his pocket.

My utterance, so formulated, clearly expresses the Russellian proposition. Now, an inference from (5) to any counterfactual like (6) is definitely not a valid inference:

6.            If I had been the winner of the chess tournament, I would have had ten coins in my pocket.

The inference is not valid, since — intuitively — the number of coins in the pocket of the actual winner has nothing to do with the number of coins in my pocket provided that I won. Moreover, we can think of a situation in which (6) would be rather counted as 'false' while (5) is still true.<sup>11</sup> Hence the inference from 'Russellian' (5) to counterfactual (6) does not represent a valid type of inference.

Consequently, a Russellian proposition does not entail a counterfactual of the form of (6), while the proposition expressed by the attributive assertion intuitively does so. Therefore, the proposition expressed by an attributive assertion cannot be identical with Russellian proposition. In short, (T) is wrong.

#### IV

Let me summarize my argumentation. The aim of the article has been to challenge the received view that attributively used sentences of the form "The  $F$  is  $G$ " have Russellian semantics. According to this view — denoted as (T) — the proposition expressed by the attributive assertion "The  $F$  is  $G$ " has the logical form of an existential statement and expresses what follows: there is an  $x$  such that  $x$  is uniquely

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<sup>11</sup> For example, suppose that I am that kind of person who never keeps money in his pocket. Intuitively, the fact that I had won the chess tournament would not have changed my habit. So the counterfactual (6) would be false in such circumstances.

$F$  and  $x$  is  $G$ . In consequence, such a proposition is false if (1) nothing satisfies the description, or (2) there is more than one object satisfying the description. As has been demonstrated, both claims can be objected along Strawsonian lines in the case of attributive assertions. Firstly, we may follow Donnellan's remarks and say that when nothing satisfies "the  $F$ ", we predicate  $G$ -hood of nothing by saying attributively "The  $F$  is  $G$ ", so we do not express a truth or a falsehood. Secondly, the so-called incomplete descriptions seem to pose a major threat to Russell's theory in the case of attributive assertions as well as with respect to the widely discussed referential ones. I have mentioned main strategies for dealing with this problem on Russellian grounds (which have been proposed in the case of referential assertions) and argued that they are unconvincing in the case of attributive assertions. Finally, I have raised an objection against (T) by appealing to an inferential property of attributive assertions. Namely, I have pointed out that the inference from an attributive assertion to a respective counterfactual is intuitively valid. However, it is definitely non-valid on the basis of the Russellian interpretation of attributive assertions.

My analysis raises a question of what a proper semantic analysis of attributive assertions is. If all the considerations are correct, it must be an analysis which (1) does not interpret attributive assertions as statements of existence of an object satisfying the description, (2) does not interpret them as entailing the uniqueness of the object satisfying the description, and (3) interprets them as entailing the respective counterfactuals. The points (1) and (2) together suggest a semantic account of attributive descriptions as referring terms. However, does such a view agree with point (3)? Both questions require further examination.

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