

Wojciech Rostworowski

The attributive-referential distinction and uses of definitive description

Filozofia Nauki 22/3, 27-42

2014

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach
dozwolonego użytku.

Wojciech Rostworowski

The Attributive–Referential Distinction and Uses of Definite Descriptions

The distinction between attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions has been widely discussed in the philosophy of language. The main bone of contention is whether the distinction indicates a semantic ambiguity. That is to say, according to some philosophers (e.g., Devitt 1981, 2004), a sentence with a definite description has two different meanings corresponding to the attributive and the referential use of the description, and it expresses a different proposition in each of the two cases. Other philosophers (like Kripke 1977, Bach 2004, 2007) reject this thesis, but they admit that there are important pragmatic differences between the two uses.

Even though there is a disagreement about the degree of significance of the attributive–referential distinction, philosophers do not usually question the distinction itself. The aim of this paper is to take up the issue which seems more fundamental, that is, whether the attributive–referential distinction is adequate. I give a negative answer to this question and argue that the two-fold distinction should be replaced by a more detailed taxonomy. In section 1, I outline the attributive–referential distinction. Sections 2 and 3 offer more elaborate analyses of the uses labelled “referential” and “attributive”, which indicate that there are definitely more than two different ways of using definite descriptions. In section 4, I briefly discuss implications of my considerations for a semantic theory of definite descriptions.

1. DONNELLAN'S DISTINCTION

In brief, the difference between attributive and referential uses of “the *F*” is as follows. When using a description¹ attributively, the speaker wishes to talk about *whatever* has (uniquely) the attribute of *F*-hood. For example, “the winner of the presidential election” is attributive in an utterance of (1) made before the election starts:

- (1) The winner of the presidential election will be a Republican.

Here, the speaker does not have a particular person in mind — she talks about whoever will win the election. By contrast, when using a description referentially, the speaker does have a particular object in mind, wishes to talk about it in her utterance, and uses “the *F*” in order to indicate it to her audience. This use can be illustrated by the following statement made at a party:

- (2) The man drinking a martini is handsome.

Here, the descriptive content of the description is merely a tool of pointing to a certain individual whom the speaker has in mind.

Of course, this characterization comes from Donnellan (1966), who introduced the distinction. Donnellan makes two remarks about the distinction. First, it describes the ways of how people *use* descriptions, so that in many cases a sentence involving a description can be used either attributively or referentially — depending on the occasion and the speaker’s intention.² Donnellan’s example of such a sentence is well-known:

- (3) The murderer of Smith is insane.

(3) is used attributively when, e.g., it is uttered by a detective who, based on the state of Smith’s body, comes to the conclusion that whoever committed the murder must be insane. To illustrate the referential use of (3), Donnellan presents a scenario in which a particular man, Jones, is accused of murdering Smith and — during the trial — someone comments on Jones’ strange behaviour by uttering (3).

According to Donnellan’s second remark, there are uses of “the *F*” which do not belong to any of the distinguished classes. He refers here to the so-called “predicative” uses of definite descriptions, such as the following statement:

¹ From now on, by saying „a description”, I will have a definite description in mind.

² Actually, Donnellan thinks that there are sentences which cannot be used in both of the distinguished ways. He illustrates the case with a sentence that, in his opinion, can be used only attributively: (2*) “Point out *the man who is drinking my martini*”. Setting aside the question whether we really cannot have a context of the referential use of (2*), this claim seems to have interesting implications. The fact that a sentence could be used only attributively would imply that there must be something in the sentence’s *meaning* or *structure* that prevents the referential way of using it. It would mean that the way of using a description is not entirely independent from the semantic and syntactic features of the sentence, and should not be regarded only as a matter of the speaker’s intention as it usually is.

(4) De Gaulle is not the king of France,

in which the speaker asserts that de Gaulle *does not have a property of being the French monarch*, and not that de Gaulle is non-identical with a certain person who occupies the French throne. What distinguishes such uses from the attributive and referential ones is that in the latter case the speaker “presupposes” or “implies” that there is an object satisfying the description. On the other hand, the so-called “generic” uses, like (5), do not fall into any of Donnellan’s classes:

(5) The whale is a mammal.³

In sum, we can say that in both attributive and referential uses of a description the speaker does not intend to talk about a certain property or type. Instead, by using “the *F*”, she wishes to talk about an individual (or individuals) — either about *one or the other* individual (or a group of individuals) which satisfies(y) *F*-hood, or about a *particular* individual (or individuals) which she “has in mind” and employs the description merely as a tool for pointing to that (those) individual(s).⁴ Thus apparently the distinction is not an exhaustive classification of uses of the phrases of the form “the *F*”.

2. REFERENTIAL USES

In this section, I will present and discuss a class of examples which philosophers usually consider as “referential”. As I will attempt to demonstrate, some philosophers explain the use in question in terms of special causal perceptual links between someone’s use of an expression and the object itself, while other theorists identify the core of the use with some set of the speaker’s expectations and intentions towards his audience.

Uses labelled as “referential” include cases in which the speaker — by using a description — (a) points to a particular object belonging to the perceptual environment she shares with her audience, (b) wants to bring to the addressee’s mind an object which used to belong to their perceptual environment, or with which they are both, as she presumes, somehow familiar. For example, I can use “Smith’s murderer” to point to a man standing right now in the dock, or to remind the audience about that person after the trial ends; moreover, by using the description “Smith’s murderer”, I can refer to Mr. Jones whom I have never met (I only read in a newspaper that he was charged with Smith’s murder).

³ Together with generic ones, we should exclude similar uses of definite descriptions (in singular), e.g.: “The condemned prisoner is allowed to order whatever he wants for his last meal”. The attributive—referential distinction is not supposed to cover such uses either.

⁴ In this sense, descriptions play a referring role in both uses. In fact, as Tałasiewicz (2010: 65-68) convincingly argues, the distinction can be considered an improvement on Strawson’s conception of referring, rather than a competing proposal (as Donnellan saw it).

Thus we may conclude that referential uses are cases in which the description stands proxy for a demonstrative or a name. For, in most cases of using a description referentially, the speaker may achieve the same goal by employing one of the aforementioned devices. However, if this were true, it would mean that one can only refer to something that is currently being perceived or known by name, which does not seem to be the case. By using “Smith’s murderer”, one can refer to the defendant once he is no longer present, and the speaker (let us assume) may not remember the defendant’s name. Nevertheless, we might be tempted to say that in such a case the description stands proxy for *another* description — an essentially different one, like “the man charged with the murder whose trial I attended today between 3 and 5 p.m. etc.” This in turn would imply that the speaker has some additional knowledge about that object, presumably enabling her to make an independent identification of that object. Nevertheless, as some have recognized, the speaker can be ignorant about a certain object, yet be able to refer to it at the same time. Devitt (2004: 302) offers many examples of this sort, e.g.: “suppose that S passes on some juicy gossip by saying »The man at the party told me...« with a particular man in mind whom she can but dimly remember.”

The characterization of referential uses as the cases in which a description stands proxy for another expression does not seem to be promising. As some philosophers have noticed, when a speaker uses a description referentially, her use of that expression is *causally* grounded in a particular object. This causal link can be direct (as it is in the case of perception) or indirect, when, e.g., the speaker refers to an object that was only somehow mentioned to her. We can exemplify the latter case by considering a dialogue. Imagine that A was present at Jones’ trial and then described Jones’ strange behaviour to B, who has never heard about Jones:

- (6) (A) I attended the trial of Smith’s murderer. The man found guilty behaved very oddly during the whole court session. He tried to bite his cuffs.
 (B) Do you think that *the defendant* was insane?

In this context, by using “the defendant”, B clearly refers to the same person A is talking about. As we may see, though B has not been acquainted with Jones (Smith’s murderer), B’s use of the description is causally grounded in Jones: the causal link is constituted by A’s *perception* of Jones and the fact that A *mentioned* Jones to B.⁵

Nevertheless, a loosely understood condition of “mentioning-an-object” to someone is usually not a sufficient condition for her *ability* to refer to it. I suppose we agree that detective Brown, who has already found Smith’s body, is not able to refer to the murderer of Smith. Neither is the chief inspector, for whom Brown prepared a report (and spoke of “Smith’s murderer” several times). The condition of mentioning-the-object must then be strengthened so that it ascribes to the speaker the

⁵ Cf. Devitt’s explanation of the referential use in terms of “designation-chains” (1981: 37-40).

ability to refer to that object. It seems that this referential ability can be passed to someone by another language user who *already has* this ability. Furthermore, the speaker who passes the ability must mention the object in some strict way, e.g., by using a name, using an indefinite description specifically, etc. In general, she must imply that she has a particular individual in mind. In (6), A clearly communicates to B that she has a certain individual in mind (i.e., she *saw* the man), and so passes the ability to refer to it to (B), who has never heard about this individual before.

In sum, the referential character of one’s usage of a description rests on a special sort of causal perceptual links between the use and a certain object. That is to say:

- (i) there is an object *d* which is somehow *accessible* to the speaker — via perception, memory, or a chain of mentioning by other language users;⁶
- (ii) the speaker aims to say something about *d* using “the *F*”.

However, according to some theorists, these two conditions, though necessary, do not constitute a sufficient condition for a referential use. There are many philosophers who think that the phenomenon of such uses can be satisfactorily explained only by appealing to a theory of communication, namely, to the Gricean model of rational conversation (e.g. Kripke 1977, Neale 1990, Bach 2004). For example, Bach maintains that an essential element of using a description (or any other kind of expression) to refer to something is a specific intention of the speaker towards her *audience*. Namely, the speaker intends her audience to *identify* the particular object which she has in mind by using the expression:

In using a noun phrase to refer to a certain individual, you aim to do two things: to get your audience to think of that individual and to take that individual to be the one you are thinking of, hence the one you are referring to. (Bach 2004: 199)

The fact that such an intention towards the audience is crucial for referring can be recognized by looking at Bach’s distinction between referential and “specific” uses of indefinite description (the latter will be discussed later). In brief, both types of uses are cases in which the speaker has a particular object in mind, but in the case of the referential use of “a/an *F*” the speaker directly communicates the identity of that object to her audience, while she does not do so in the case of the specific use. Although the two cases seem to be somehow similar, Bach makes a clear-cut distinction between them. As he puts it, when we speak about a particular object, though we

⁶ A problem with this characterization is that in some cases there is simply no such object. I could be hallucinating and attempting to refer to “the man carrying the walking stick”, while there is no one there (Donnellan 1966: 296). This would be a case of a failed reference; still, the use itself would be referential in character. In order to account for such cases, we may reformulate our characterization by saying that, at least, the speaker *believes* that there is an object *d* perceived by her or linked to her by a chain-of-mentioning, etc. (i.e., satisfying all the relevant conditions).

do not convey its identity to our audience, we are merely “alluding” to that object and not making a genuine reference (Bach 2004: 206).

In sum, apart from the conditions (i) and (ii), the characterization of the referential use must include the following conditions:

- (iii) the speaker presumes that d — the object she has in mind — is also accessible via perception, memory, or a chain of mentioning to her audience,
- (iv) she intends her audience to associate d with the used description and to grasp the proposition about d which she expresses.

Altogether, we see that when philosophers talk about referential uses, they do not have the same class of uses in mind. In order to illustrate this, consider Donnellan’s example:

- (7) The strongest man in the world can lift at least 450 lbs.

Suppose that my grounds for asserting (7) are, as Donnellan puts it, that (i) I believe Vladimir to be the strongest man, and (ii) I think he can lift 450 lbs. Is then the use of “the strongest man in the world” attributive or referential? Donnellan writes:

if I do not expect nor intend that my audience shall recognize that I want to talk about Vladimir and to become informed about *his* strength, we have no reason to say that I referred to Vladimir. What I have been describing, of course, is a case of what I would call an attributive use of a definite description. (2012: 119-20)

Thus the lack of intention to convey the identity of the strongest man determines, according to Donnellan, a non-referential character of the description use. Presumably, Bach would say the same. However, according to Devitt’s (2004) account, this is not the case. Provided that there is an appropriate causal perceptual link between Vladimir and my use of “the strongest man...” (I could have “borrowed” the reference from another person who attended Vladimir’s performance and told me about it), my use of the description *is* referential.

It is not my aim here to decide whose account best captures the nature of reference. Instead, I want to show that the referential—attributive dichotomy is not an adequate classification of uses of descriptions *no matter which* account of reference we choose. But this has to wait until I have presented some observations concerning the attributive uses.

3. ATTRIBUTIVE USES

In this section, I will show that the uses we label “attributive” constitute a quite heterogeneous class; namely, they differ from one another with respect to two aspects — the uniqueness presuppositions and the speaker’s grounds. Let me discuss these issues in separate subsections.

3.1. Attributive use and uniqueness presuppositions

The issue of “uniqueness presuppositions” is a quite extensive topic, but I will try to discuss it briefly with respect to the attributively used descriptions.

In general, both uses of “the *F*” — the attributive and the referential one — seem to carry a presupposition that there is one individual being talked about, which is signaled by using the definite article together with a singular nominal. This is unquestionable as far as the referential uses are concerned: the uniqueness presupposition is related to the nature of the use which is to make a *singular* reference. However, the case of the attributive use is not as straightforward. In fact, I think that some attributive uses lack uniqueness presuppositions.

Let me start with attributive uses which evidently carry the aforementioned presuppositions and explain what these presuppositions actually are. On Donnellan’s account, in using a description attributively the speaker talks about “whatever” has uniquely the attribute from the description. Hence the speaker presupposes that *there exists a unique object having the attribute in question*. This can be easily illustrated by the following example:

- (8) The winner of the presidential election in 2016 in USA will be a Republican.

On the other hand, in many cases a description is — in an obvious way — not a uniquely denoting expression. In fact, example (1) — which contains only “the winner of the presidential election” — is one of such cases, since the speaker does not specify which presidential election she has in mind. Nonetheless, it is quite clear that the speaker has one person in mind — the one who is uniquely the winner of the particular election *she refers to*. Thus the speaker presupposes that there is one individual who has the property of winning the particular election which is being referred to.

In a nutshell, the speaker using a description attributively presupposes that there exists a *unique* object that has a *certain property*. This can be a property from the description, or a more complex property which is, in some sense, an extension of the one from the description. In particular, we may have contexts in which the uniqueness presupposition is formulated explicitly:

- (9) *Only one* person can win this game. *The winner* will get all the prizes.
(10) The *unique* person who will win this game will get all the prizes.

These uses of descriptions bear an essential similarity to what Ludlow and Neale call the “definite use” of indefinite descriptions. A speaker uses “a/an *F*” in a definite way if she does not know the identity of a/an *F*, yet she has some strong reasons to think that there is exactly one *F*, and so she talks about a unique *F* using “a/an *F*”. Ludlow (2011) illustrates the use in question with the following example:

- (11) [A teacher announces to his class]: I have statistical evidence that *a student* cheated on the exam. Fortunately there only appears to be one cheater.

Note that like in (9) and (10), the speaker who utters (11) does not know the identity of the individual she is talking about, yet she explicitly communicates that she is talking about *one* individual. In sum, some attributive uses have much in common with the definite use of indefinite descriptions. This is not surprising, since the latter use was distinguished based on its similarity to the behaviour of definite noun phrases.

However, as I have pointed out earlier, not all attributive uses seem to carry the uniqueness presuppositions. First, let me observe that sometimes the speaker, in using a description attributively, does not actually have any reasons to think that there is exactly one object that satisfies the description (or an extension of it). For example, detective Brown, who investigates Smith's body, may have no evidence that only one person committed the crime. In particular, we may consider a scenario in which the detective is troubled by the fact that the body was mutilated in such a short time and begins to think that there were more people involved. Consider the following utterance:

- (12) *Smith's murderer* must have acted very quickly. I am pretty sure that it was a gang killing.

In this context the use of "Smith's murderer" in the first sentence apparently does not presuppose that there was a unique person who killed Smith. Otherwise, Brown would contradict himself, i.e., his presupposition would be inconsistent with the claim made in the second sentence. What the speaker seems to presuppose is merely that Smith was killed.

Interestingly, Ludlow and Neale distinguish a use of indefinite descriptions which mirrors the kind of attributive use that lacks the uniqueness presupposition. According to them, the use of "a/an *F*" has a purely *quantificational* character if the speaker's grounds for his utterance are wholly general and do not imply that there is actually one *F*. In brief, to use "a/an *F*" quantificationally is to use it exactly as an existential quantifier (that is, in a sense: "at least one *F*"). In order to contrast this use with the definite one, we can consider the following example:

- (13) [The teacher says:] *A student* cheated on the exam — the answer sheet was stolen from my office. I suspect that there are several students involved.

Note that both uses in (12) and (13) are similar in that the speaker does not know the identity of the culprit and, moreover, expresses doubt that there is actually one person satisfying the appropriate description. Based on this analogy, we can say that some attributive uses of (definite) descriptions are "purely quantificational".

In sum, we have “attributive” uses that carry uniqueness presuppositions and some that lack such presuppositions.

3.2. Attributive use and the speaker’s grounds

In this subsection, I will show that attributive uses are essentially different from one another with respect to the speaker’s grounds. According to Ludlow and Neale, the speaker’s grounds are the proposition which is the object of the most relevant belief that furnishes the grounds for an utterance (Ludlow, Neale 1991: 176). Her grounds may be general, if the proposition in question is general, or singular, if the proposition is singular.

Illustrations of the attributive uses given in the literature are mostly the cases in which the speaker’s grounds are general. In particular, we can find many examples where the speaker who uses “the *F*” has no idea which object is actually the *F*, hence there is no singular proposition that may furnish the grounds for her utterance. However, as Donnellan pointed out, such ignorance is not essential to the attributive use. He presents an example in which the person who utters a sentence of the form “The *F* is *G*” entertains a singular proposition that certain *d* is the *F*; nevertheless, this proposition does not play any role in the speaker’s route to the belief that the *F* is *G*. This is illustrated by a modified example with the trial of Jones. The core of the example is the same: during the trial, someone utters “The murderer of Smith is insane”. However, the speaker is not commenting on Jones’ particular behaviour, but bases her claim — like the detective — on some general presumption that anyone who killed Smith in such a horrible manner must be insane. As Donnellan notes, the speaker’s use of “Smith’s murderer” is attributive in such a case.

The fact that in many cases of the attributive use the speaker’s grounds are general is quite obvious. However, according to many philosophers, a use of a description counts as “attributive” provided that the speaker does not intend her audience to make an independent identification of that object, even though the speaker’s grounds may be purely singular (naturally, these are the philosophers who find conditions (iii) and (iv) necessary for the referential uses). An example of such a use has already been given at the end of section 1 — it is Donnellan’s example of the strongest man in the world. In these circumstances, I have singular grounds for my claim expressed in (7) — it is my belief about Vladimir, whom I take to be the strongest man, that *he* can lift 450 lbs. Thus, in some sense, I have Vladimir in mind while saying (7). Nevertheless, I do not intend my audience to recognize that I am talking about Vladimir (I may presume that they have no idea who is the strongest man in the world), so that I do not communicate to them that it is Vladimir who lifted 450 lbs. Hence, as many philosophers would say, my use of “the strongest man...” is attributive in spite of the fact that my utterance is based on a singular belief concerning Vladimir.

Let me draw a third analogy between definite and indefinite descriptions. Apart from the definite, quantificational, and referential uses (the last one is, of course, analogous to the referential use of definite descriptions), Ludlow and Neale distinguish the *specific* use of indefinite descriptions. In using “a/an *F*” specifically, the speaker has singular grounds for her utterance, but she does not intend to communicate the identity of that particular *F* to her audience (in particular, she may not expect that the object is known to them). Under a specific use, the speaker may, however, communicate the mere fact that she has a particular object in mind (without revealing its identity), like in the following example offered by Ludlow:

- (14) I’m sorry to announce that yesterday I witnessed *a student* cheating on the exam.

Naturally, the specific uses of indefinite descriptions are analogous to the uses of (definite) descriptions similar to the one in (7). For in both cases the speaker has singular grounds for her utterance (that is to say, she has a particular object in mind while using a description), but she does not communicate the identity of the object to her audience. In sum, it seems that not only do we have “attributive-definite” and “attributive-quantificational” uses, but also “attributive-specific” ones.

4. AGAINST A DICHOTOMOUS ACCOUNT

In this section, I aim to exploit the observations made in two previous sections in order to demonstrate that the attributive–referential dichotomy is incorrect. As I have already noticed in the second part of section 2, the notion of “referential” use is not unambiguous in the literature, since some philosophers regard the set of expectations of the speaker towards her audience as a constitutive element of making an act of “referring”, while others think that only the relation of “having in mind” — explained in terms of some causal connections between the use and the object — is essential to the referential use. I am going to show that no matter which account of the referential use we choose, the attributive–referential distinction turns out to be inadequate. As one may already surmise — based on the observations from the previous sections — the distinction ought to be replaced by a classification introducing (at least) three different types of uses of descriptions.

First, let me assume that it is the intention of the speaker towards her audience that determines the referential character of a description — the intention of pointing to a certain object with which, as the speaker presumes, the addressee is familiar. That is to say, I assume that an adequate characterization of the referential use is given by conditions (i)–(iv). This raises the question of how we should account for the attributive use, given such a characterization of the referential one.

To begin with, we need to observe that Donnellan’s characterization of the attributive use (as talking about “whatever” has the attribute from the description) is

not entirely adequate. First, a speaker may have a different description in mind than the one she actually formulates; that is to say, by saying “the *F*”, she may have the *F** in mind, so that — in such a case — she talks about whatever has the property of *F**-hood (rather than *F*-hood). This concerns not only the so-called “incomplete” descriptions like “the winner”, “the murderer”, which presumably somehow abbreviate what the speaker has in mind. There are also situations in which the speaker believes that the *F** is not *F* at all. This primarily holds for referential uses, but we may have a complex description used attributively, with one of its constituents used referentially. According to the speaker’s belief, such a complex description *does not* apply to the particular object she refers to. To illustrate this, recall Donnellan’s example of the usurper (1966: 290). Imagine that based on the fact that the usurper is extremely tall, I say to his minions:

(15) The father of our king must be very tall.

Here, my assertion apparently concerns the father of *the usurper* and not that of the real king. So it is not literally true that in using a description attributively the speaker talks about whatever has the property from the description.

The second problem with Donnellan’s characterization lies in the *whatever*-clause. Donnellan seems to suggest that we can recognize attributive uses by the fact that a paraphrase involving such a clause fits the speaker’s intention. For example, the detective’s use of “the murderer of Smith” can be recognized as attributive since we can naturally paraphrase his statement as, e.g., “The murderer of Smith, whoever he is, is insane”. However, this is rather misleading. First, the paraphrase may be counterintuitive in attributive cases where the speaker has singular grounds for her utterance, like in (7). Since the speaker has a particular object in mind, she would not express her thought by saying “the *F* — whatever it may be”. Second, and more importantly, such a way of paraphrasing may suit some referential uses as well. Suppose that I see a man in a black mask, who behaves in an outrageous manner. I comment:

(16) The man wearing a black mask is insane.

Since the identity of the man is unknown to me, I may as well say: “The man wearing a black mask, whoever he may be, is insane” (cf. Bach 2004: 216-217). In spite of this, my use of “the man wearing a black mask” is clearly referential.

Thus the characterization of attributive uses involving the *whatever*-clause is not adequate. What feature, then, is common to all such uses — one that makes them distinct from the referential ones at the same time? When we look at the cases of attributive uses where the speaker’s grounds are singular, we can observe that the *only* difference between them and the referential uses is that the speaker does not communicate the identity of the object to his audience. This feature is, on the other hand, common to all other cases of attributive uses. Hence we should characterize the at-

tributive use of a description as a use in which the speaker *does not intend to convey the identity of the described object* by means of the description.

In sum, provided that we adopt conditions (i)-(iv) of the referential use, all attributive uses fail to satisfy (at least) condition (iv). The condition says that the speaker intends her audience to recognize that she is talking about *d* (and to grasp the proposition about *d* she states). However, we need to observe that if a use of a description does not fulfil any other condition among (i)-(iv), it does not satisfy (iv) as well.⁷ In consequence, in order to classify a certain use (provided it is not predicative or generic) as “attributive”, it is enough that it is non-referential, i.e., it does not jointly satisfy conditions (i)-(iv).

In my view, such an account does not offer an adequate classification of uses of descriptions. The reasons are as follows. As we have seen, the non-referential uses (i.e., the uses which do not jointly satisfy (i)-(iv)) exhibit a wide diversity. Based on the results of section 2, we can distinguish cases in which (a) the speaker presupposes that there is *exactly one F*, but this object has not yet been identified by her, and she uses a description “the *F*” in order to talk about that *one* individual, (b) the speaker uses “the *F*” in order to talk about *an* individual, but she does not presuppose that there is exactly one individual of this kind, (c) the speaker uses the description in order to talk about one *particular* individual *familiar* to her, but she does not expect her audience to identify this individual in some independent way. In other words, the speaker who uses a description non-referentially may still use it *in several different ways*. Provided that referential uses constitute a class of very special uses (determined by a specific intention of the speaker towards her audience), and attributive uses include “all the rest” (if we put aside generic and predicative uses), the dichotomous division appears to be very inaccurate.

The dichotomous account is also undermined by uses of descriptions which fit Ludlow’s and Neale’s characterization of “specificity” (for that reason, let me call them “specific”). On the one hand, they resemble other attributive uses: the speaker does not aim to convey the identity of the object. As we may observe in the examples like (7), it is the *property* of being “the strongest man in the world” — rather than the *identity* of the man (i.e., the fact that it is Vladimir) — which is somehow important for the speech act. On the other hand, the specific uses are quite similar to the referential ones: there is always a particular object in which the use of the speaker’s description is grounded (via perception, or some more complex causal chains), and the speaker bases her claim on her knowledge about this particular object — just like it is in the cases of the referential use. In short, specific uses seem to be somewhere in

⁷ Provided that (i) is not satisfied (i.e., the object is not accessible to the speaker), neither is (iv) — the speaker cannot convey the identity of a non-identified object. Given that (ii) is not satisfied, i.e., the speaker does not expect that the object is accessible to her audience, she would not expect the audience to recognize its identity. If (iii) is not satisfied, i.e., the speaker does not talk about the referred object at all, she does not convey its identity either.

the middle between the genuinely referential uses and other attributive uses. Obviously, a dichotomous classification cannot account for this fact.

The last observation indicates a reason why removing the conditions (iii) and (iv) from the characterization of the referential use does not help us avoid the conclusion that a dichotomous classification is incorrect.⁸ This is because what makes the view in question — i.e., a more liberal notion of the referential use — attractive is, at the same, its weakness. On this view, a use of a description is referential provided that the speaker exploits some causal perceptual links to a particular object, regardless of whether she presumes that her audience is familiar with that object. In consequence, specific uses will fall into the category “referential”. Accordingly, we will put together (a) uses in which the speaker clearly refers the addressee to an individual with whom — as the speaker presumes — the addressee is familiar and (b) uses in which the speaker believes that the description “says nothing” to the audience (i.e., the addressee will not figure out which object is meant by the speaker). So again, this will make the class of *referential* uses essentially heterogenous. Consequently, the use of “the strongest man in world” in (7) — by someone who presumes that her audience has never heard about Vladimir — would belong to the same class that contains the use of “Smith’s murderer” as employed by someone pointing to Jones.

In sum, putting specific uses into the category “referential”, based on some similarities between them, does not change the situation at all. As I have said, these uses combine some features of genuinely referential uses with features characteristic of paradigmatically attributive uses and thus seem to lie somewhere between these two groups. Hence, no matter which of the two groups we assign them to, the resulting division will appear inadequate — in both cases one of its two classes will include cases similar to the members of the opposite class.

The above considerations strongly indicate that a correct distinction of uses of descriptions should include, at least, *three* different groups. These groups correspond to cases in which:

- (A) the speaker’s use of “the *F*” rests on some causal perceptual links to a particular object *d*, and the speaker presumes that her audience is capable of recognizing this fact and *will actually* recognize that it is *d* that the speaker’s use is about; in other words, by means of “the *F*” the speaker refers the audience to *d* — with which, as she presumes, they are familiar;
- (B) the speaker’s use of “the *F*” rests on some causal perceptual links to a particular object *d*, yet she does not presume that her audience is capable of recognizing this fact; nor that the audience will recognize that the use of “the *F*” is about *d* in particular; in short, the speaker does

⁸ This alternative characterization of the referential use was strongly suggested by the reviewer of a draft of this article.

intend to communicate a proposition about *d*, though her grounds are singular;

- (C) the speaker's use of "the *F*" does not rest on causal perceptual links to any particular object and she has some purely general grounds for her statement.

As I have said, this is the *minimal* list of groups that should be identified by an adequate account of uses of descriptions.

5. CONCLUSIONS — RELEVANCE FOR A SEMANTIC THEORY

In the last section, I aim to briefly address the issue whether the above conclusion suggests in any way what would be a proper semantic treatment of descriptions. As I have said at the beginning, there has been a wide debate on whether the attributive–referential distinction indicates a semantic ambiguity. Theorists who reject this claim usually defend Russell's theory of descriptions as a universally correct account of descriptions. In the light of the general conclusion that a two-fold distinction is inadequate, the question should be modified as follows: is Russell's theory capable of covering all possible uses of descriptions, or do we need several different semantic accounts of descriptions? I do not aim here to answer this question conclusively, but I wish to indicate some difficulties one must face in defending the Russellian account. These problems will concern issues which have been raised in the discussion on the attributive–referential distinction.

At first glance, the idea of having one semantic theory seems to be convincing. It is quite implausible to think that each distinct use determines different semantic properties of a description that would in turn require a separate semantic account of each case. In fact, this is what Ludlow and Neale say with respect to indefinite descriptions. They defend the thesis that in spite of the variety of uses, Russell's theory provides a universally correct account of indefinite descriptions. As some argue, there are several methodological reasons that support the unified quantificational treatment of descriptions as well as some reasons against postulating an ambiguity with respect to descriptions (e.g., Kripke 1977, Bach 2004, 2007). Provided that there are more than two uses of descriptions, the ambiguity thesis would be more extreme, and the counterarguments would certainly be more appealing. However, there are also some responses to them. In particular, Amaral (2008) convincingly argues that the ambiguity of descriptions should be regarded as polysemy rather than homonymy, which in turn undermines some of the objections raised against the ambiguity thesis.

In general, I think that my observations about the diversity of attributive uses allow us to see that Russell's treatment of descriptions — though it is intuitive in some cases — may be questionable in some other cases. First, Russell's theory seems to be

wrong in cases like (12), where the speaker does not presuppose that there is exactly one individual satisfying the description. Russell’s analysis of the statement (12) would go along the following lines:

- (12*) There is exactly one x such that x murdered Smith, and x must have acted very quickly. I am pretty sure that there were more than one x such that x murdered Smith.

Yet this interpretation is plainly wrong, since it explicitly contains a contradiction; whereas when we hear (12), we intuitively feel that it involves no contradiction.⁹

Second, specific uses of (definite) descriptions may be vulnerable to the problem of incompleteness. It is often argued that incomplete descriptions (like “the table”, “the winner”, etc.) pose a major problem to Russell’s theory, since the theory predicts that all subject-predicate sentences with incomplete descriptions express false propositions, which seems to be plainly wrong. Russell’s advocates try to eliminate this implausible conclusion by saying that either an incomplete description is elliptical for a complete one (which the speaker can supply), or that the domain of quantification is somehow restricted to the objects salient in a given context. However, as Devitt (2004: 297-303) recognizes, neither of these explanations is convincing in the case of referential uses. He mentions a few problems, in particular the problem of ignorance. Namely, the speaker may be unable to supply a full description needed to make the original description uniquely denote the object in question, and the domain of the context does not always determine this object either. To see this, recall Devitt’s example of passing a gossip: “The man at the party last night told me that...” We may assume that I hardly remember the man in question (so I am not able to make an independent identification of him), and the context does not determine one particular man. However, intuitively, my assertion can be true, whereas the Russellian theory predicts it cannot.

The problem of ignorance may also be relevant to the specific use. In fact, this is not surprising, since on Devitt’s account such uses would certainly be classified as referential. Consider the following example:

- (17) The organizer of yesterdays’ party ordered 100 bottles of alcohol!

Suppose that I base my claim on some evidence that Jones — who, as I suppose, single-handedly organized the party — placed an enormous order for alcohol. Moreover, let us assume that I address my utterance to a person who, as I presume, does not know Jones, so my primary intention is merely to inform the addressee about the amount of the alcohol served at the party. This makes (17) a case of the specific

⁹ There are proposals according to which a sentence with a definite description does not exactly express the proposition that there exists one object satisfying the property from the description (e.g., Szabo 2000, Ludlow and Segal 2004). Presumably, such an account captures the cases in which the speaker does make a uniqueness presupposition.

use. However, imagine that Jones has a twin brother — a fact that is completely unknown to me — who was also involved in organizing the party so that the description in (17) is not a uniquely denoting phrase. Note that neither of the Russellian approaches can help us account for the claim that I may have, nevertheless, expressed a truth by saying (17). In the presented circumstances, the domain of quantification certainly includes Jones and his twin brother, so the context does not determine one person as the organizer of the party. What is more, I may be unable to fill out the description so as to make it uniquely denote Jones (i.e., I may be unable to formulate a description of Jones which distinguishes him from his twin brother).

To sum up, we see that the unitary Russellian theory of descriptions faces some difficulties when we consider various types of uses of descriptions. Given this variety, presumably no unitary semantic theory can handle the task of specifying the logical form and the truth-conditions of sentences with descriptions.

REFERENCES

- Amaral P. (2008), *Definite Descriptions are Ambiguous*, „Analysis” 68(300), 288-297.
- Bach K. (2004), *Descriptions. Points of Reference* [in:] *Descriptions and Beyond*, M. Reimer, A. Bezuidenhout (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 189-229.
- Bach K. (2007), *Referentially Used Descriptions. A Reply to Devitt*, „European Journal of Analytic Philosophy” 3(2): 33-48.
- Devitt M. (1981), *Designation*, New York (NY): Columbia University Press.
- Devitt M. (2004), *The Case for Referential Descriptions* [in:] *Descriptions and Beyond*, M. Reimer, A. Bezuidenhout (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 280-305.
- Donnellan K. (1966), *Reference and Definite Descriptions*, „Philosophical Review” 75, 281-304.
- Donnellan K. (2012), *Speaker's Reference, Descriptions, and Anaphora* [in:] *Keith Donnellan. Essays on Reference, Language, and Mind*, J. Almog, P. Leonardi (eds.), New York (NY): Oxford University Press, 115-146.
- Kripke S. (1977), *Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference*, „Midwest Studies in Philosophy” 2(1), 255-276.
- Margolis J., Fales E. (1976), *Donnellan on Definite Descriptions*, „Philosophia” 6(2), 289-302.
- Ludlow P. (2011), *Descriptions* [in:] *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), E. N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/descriptions/>>.
- Ludlow P., Neale S. (1991), *Indefinite Descriptions*. In *Defense of Russell*, „Linguistics and Philosophy” 14, 171-202.
- Ludlow P., Segal G. (2004), *On a Unitary Semantical Analysis for Definite and Indefinite Descriptions* [in:] *Descriptions and Beyond*, M. Reimer, A. Bezuidenhout (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 420-436.
- Szabo Z. (2000), *Descriptions and Uniqueness*, „Philosophical Studies” 101(1): 29-57.
- Tałasiewicz M. (2010), *Prolegomena do teorii wyrażeń nominalnych. Rekonstrukcja koncepcji Petera F. Strawsona*, „Przegląd Filozoficzny — Nowa Seria” 75(3), 53-75.