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Referentially Used Descriptions: A Reply to Devitt

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This is a welcome opportunity to clarify my approach to referential uses of definite descriptions, as well as to highlight what I take to be the main shortcomings of the view that definite descriptions have referential meanings. Michael Devitt and I have previously debated referential uses in the course of stating our respective views (see our 2004 articles), but here in this issue we both aim to dispel certain misunderstandings and to sharpen our criticisms of the other's views.¹

Devitt recognizes that it was not enough to target the view that referential uses are akin to particularized conversational implicatures. So now he focuses on the view that they are akin to generalized conversational implicatures (GCIs). He argues that although in principle the GGI model could explain referential uses, it does not in fact provide the best explanation of them. He insists that the fact that definite descriptions are standardized for being used referentially is best explained on the supposition that, as a matter of semantic convention, they have referential meanings, in addition to the quantificational meanings given by Russell's theory of descriptions. He acknowledges that this commits him to the view that the word 'the' is semantically ambiguous. Accordingly, recognizing a use as referential (or as attributive, for that matter) is not like recognizing a GCI but is more akin to, indeed is a case of, disambiguation.

Devitt devotes a good part of his article to rebutting my account of referential uses. He challenges the GCI model and identifies a number of difficulties with my view, which he construes as based on that model. However, my account does not rely on that model. I do say that referential uses are "akin" to GCIs, but I did not mean that they are, or involve, GCI. All I meant was that they too are cases of standardized uses, as opposed to

¹ All unidentified page references will be to Devitt's article in this issue, "Referential Descriptions and Conversational Implicatures." Also, unless otherwise indicated, by 'description' I will mean singular definite description.

conventionalized uses, and that they, like GCIs, comprise a kind of pragmatic regularity. Devitt is welcome to argue that the distinction between standardization and conventionalization is bogus or at least that it does not help in defense of a pragmatic account of referential uses of descriptions, but that is not what he does argue. His case against my account is clearly predicated on the assumption that in my view referential uses are much more like GCIs than I actually claim. Either he read more into my use of ‘akin’ than I intended, or he just assumed that GCI is the only kind of pragmatic regularity there is.

In reply I will identify the many points on which Devitt and I agree, including ones that reveal the shortcomings of the GCI approach to referential uses. Then I will lay out the main features of my account and explain why it is not such an approach, hence not vulnerable to Devitt’s main objections. I will also explain how, in my view, referential uses exploit the quantificational meaning of definite descriptions. Next I will answer Devitt’s subsidiary objections, which do not depend on the mistaken supposition that I rely on the GCI model. Finally, I will enumerate some difficulties with Devitt’s view that ‘the’ is semantically ambiguous. But first we should take a quick look at Russell’s theory and Donnellan’s distinction.

1. Russell’s theory and Donnellan’s distinction

Russell’s (1905) theory of descriptions concerns the meanings of sentences containing definite descriptions. The most important feature of this view is that the proposition semantically expressed by a sentence containing a definite description does not depend on what, if anything, satisfies the description. This feature is easiest to see in the case of simple description sentences of the form ‘The F is G’, in contrast to sentences of the form ‘A is G’, where ‘A’ is a logically proper name. A sentence of the latter sort expresses a singular proposition, which has the individual A as a constituent.² Suppose that A is the F, hence that A is denoted by ‘the F’. Even so, A is not a constituent of the proposition

² In limiting our attention to sentences of this form I will not take up cases in which descriptions contain bound pronouns, fall within the scope of modal operators or propositional attitude verbs, or occur as predicates rather than in (apparent) argument position. I believe that these and other complications do not bear on the debate between Devitt and me, although they do need to be taken into account by a comprehensive theory of descriptions.

expressed by ‘The F is G’. This is a general, uniqueness proposition, to which ‘the F’ contributes a quantificational structure, not its denotation A. Unlike the proposition expressed by ‘A is G’, this proposition is not object-dependent. For it to be true there must be a unique F, which must be G; otherwise, it is false. But its truth condition does not specify which individual this is (so its truth relative to a possible world – not that Russell used this phrase – in which the unique F is something other than the actual F requires that the unique F in that world be G). A sentence of the form ‘The F is G’ may be represented, to use a version of the notation of restricted quantification, by ‘[the x: Fx] Gx’, just as ‘Some F is G’ and ‘Every F is G’ may be represented, respectively, by ‘[some x: Fx] Gx’ and by ‘[every x: Fx] Gx’.³

Russell’s theory of descriptions says nothing about how definite descriptions are used. Donnellan’s (1966) referential-attributive distinction concerns that. It is, after all, a distinction between two ways of using descriptions. A speaker using a description attributively intends to be talking about, to be referring only “in a weak sense” to, whichever individual satisfies the description (or, if it is incomplete, a certain completion of it). In this way, the description enters “essentially” into the statement made, whose content is a general proposition. On the other hand, when a speaker uses a description referentially, he uses it merely “to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about and states something about that person or thing” (1966: 285). In this case the content of the statement is a singular proposition. Donnellan spoke of this distinction as indicating an “ambiguity,” but he was not clear on whether this ambiguity is semantic or pragmatic. He was content to observe that “a definite description occurring in one and the same sentence may, on different occasions of use, function in either way” (1966: 281). To claim that it involves a semantic ambiguity is to take Devitt’s position, whereas to claim that the ambiguity is merely pragmatic is to reject that position. Another possible

³ This is the notation used by Stephen Neale (1990). Unlike Russell’s original formulation and modern versions of it using the notation of standard first-order logic, such as ‘ $\exists x(\forall y(Fy \equiv y=x) \& Gx)$ ’, it avoids the mismatch between surface grammatical form and logical form for which Russell’s theory is notorious. As Neale has since explained (2001: 224-232), Russell’s claim that descriptions are “incomplete symbols” and similar claims are independent of this mismatch. What makes descriptions incomplete is not that they “disappear upon logical analysis,” making grammatical form misleading as to logical form, but that they introduce quantificational, variable-binding structure into the sentences in which they occur.

position is that definite descriptions are unambiguously referential (Strawson 1950), but that position is neither popular nor plausible.⁴

Interestingly, Russell recognized a similar distinction regarding uses of proper names. A name can be used “directly” or “indirectly.” When used directly, or “as a name,” it serves “merely to indicate what we are speaking about; [the name] is no part of the fact asserted ... : it is merely part of the symbolism by which we express our thought” (1919: 175). Russell allowed that names can also be used “as descriptions,” observing, just as Donnellan later observed about descriptions, “there is nothing in the phraseology to show whether they are being used in this way or as names.” Interestingly, Donnellan’s distinction closely parallels Russell’s. In the case of an attributive use,

if there is anything which might be identified as reference here, it is reference in a very weak sense -- namely, reference to *whatever* is the one and only one F, if there is any such. ... But this lack of particularity is absent from the referential use of definite descriptions precisely because the description is here merely a device for getting one's audience to pick out or think of the thing to be spoken about, a device which may serve its function even if the description is incorrect. (Donnellan 1966: 304)

As Donnellan further explains, “More importantly perhaps, in the referential use as opposed to the attributive, there is a *right* thing to be picked out by the audience and its being the right thing is not simply a function of its fitting the description” (1966: 304).

Devitt and I agree about the difference between referential and attributive uses, that the difference corresponds to the difference between asserting a singular and asserting a general proposition. We agree that in the referential case, the speaker has a specific individual in mind and uses the description with the intention that the hearer identify this individual and take the speaker’s singular statement to be about that individual. However, we disagree on whether the distinction is linguistically encoded, amounting to a semantic ambiguity, in particular, as Devitt thinks, an ambiguity in the word ‘the’. In my view, definite descriptions have unitary quantificational meanings, which figure not only in their attributive use but in their referential use as well. We also seem to have an underlying disagreement, about what it takes to refer. This will emerge later.

⁴ A further possible, indeed actual, position (Recanati 1989 and Bezuidenhout 1997) is that definite descriptions are not semantically ambiguous but underdetermined as between the attributive and referential uses, in the sense that sentences containing them fall short of expressing either singular or general propositions. This view seems implausible, for reasons spelled out by Neale (1990: 110-112n).

2. Points of agreement (and misunderstanding)

Devitt and I agree on a number of points:

- Referential uses exploit a causal-perceptual link to the object.
- In using a definite description in subject position referentially, a speaker makes a singular statement (asserts a singular proposition) about the object referred to.
- Referential uses comprise some sort of linguistic regularity, if not semantic then pragmatic.
- The claim that definite descriptions are semantically ambiguous as between their referential and attributive uses is incompatible with a Russellian theory.
- Defending a Russellian theory of singular definite descriptions requires giving a pragmatic account of their referential uses.
- Referential uses do not involve particularized conversational implicature.
- Most definite descriptions that we use are incomplete (not uniquely satisfied).
- Most uses of incomplete definite descriptions are referential.

I will not comment on any of these points of agreement, not because they aren't worthy of further discussion but because they do not bear on our disagreements. However, there is one area of agreement that does bear discussion. Devitt and I agree about the shortcomings of the view that he mistakenly attributes to me.

Devitt and I agree that referential uses do not involve generalized conversational implicature. Unfortunately, he thinks that I think they do, or at least are enough like GCI that objections to a GCI account of referential uses carry over to my account. Devitt forcefully argues against the "Gricean pragmatic hypothesis," according to which a sentence of the form 'The F is G' is not ambiguous (unless 'F' or 'G' is ambiguous) and a speaker who utters such a sentence and uses 'the F' referentially "says a general proposition" and thereby conversationally implicates a singular proposition. The Russellian, Devitt thinks, must provide "a plausible account of why the speaker would think that saying the general proposition will convey the singular one and why the hearer would take the saying of the general one to convey the singular one" (12).

Devitt argues that there is no hope for such an account. For whenever the description is incomplete, as in most cases, there is no good candidate for what that general proposition is, hence no way that saying that the general proposition can be the means by which the speaker conveys the singular one. This problem arises on either of the two ways this account could go: “(a) [The speaker] might mean that proposition *as well as* the singular one. (b) Even though she does not mean the general proposition, saying it might be a way of conveying the singular one just as in a metaphor saying something you don’t mean is a way of conveying what you do” (12). On either (a) or (b) “the problem posed by incomplete definites [used referentially] is that there is frequently no general proposition that the speaker might plausibly be thought to have said.”

I agree with Devitt on all this, despite the fact that his argument against (b) above is largely directed (in his section 6) against my account. He rightly asks, “What would be the route from the general proposition said to the singular one meant? Plausible answers would involve something like a Gricean derivation of the singular proposition. Bach does not provide such answers. I doubt that there are any” (17). However, the account I actually give does not oblige me to provide such reasons. For it is not my view that “saying a general proposition” is the means by which a speaker conveys a singular proposition about the intended referent.⁵

Devitt’s critique of my view is based largely on a misunderstanding. Contrary to what he repeatedly suggests, it is not my view that “the speaker’s route from the singular thought that x is G to the use of ‘the F’ to refer to x in ‘the F is G’ is via the general quantificational thought that, according to Russell, is expressed by ‘the F is G’” (16). Nor do I suppose that, in the fashion of a conversational implicature (particularized or generalized), the hearer is to consider the general proposition expressed by the

⁵ Perhaps Devitt is misled by the fact that I do hold that in a certain weak sense of ‘say’, the locutionary sense, the speaker does say a general proposition when, in using an incomplete description, he utters ‘The F is G’. But this is the proposition that the F is G, which does not involve any completion of ‘the F’ (by means of additional descriptive material or domain restriction). Clearly Devitt is using ‘say’ in a stronger sense, since he is considering the view that what is said is some general proposition that is the result of completing ‘the F’ in the utterance of ‘The F is G’. Moreover, I do not hold that when a speaker says something p in the locutionary sense, he must intend the hearer to figure out that he means that q on the basis of his saying that p. Nor do I hold that the hearer does in fact figure out what the speaker means via this route. For further discussion, see Bach 2001: 24-25.

description sentence, reason that it is not what the speaker means (or not merely what he means), and then infer from the fact that the speaker said it anyway that he meant the singular proposition that A is G, where A = the F (or some uniquely relevant or salient F). That is not my picture at all.

3. Referential uses and the quantificational meaning of definite descriptions

If a singular definite description ‘the F’ is incomplete and this is obvious, for the speaker to make evident his intention in using the description, there must be either (in the referential case) an obviously distinguished F or (in the attributive case) an obvious way of distinguishing one. If the speaker is using the description attributively in uttering ‘The F is G’, presumably he is stating a general proposition, involving some sort of completion of or domain restriction on ‘the F’. On the other hand, as I have long held (Bach 1994: 124-126), if the speaker is using an obviously incomplete definite description referentially, he is not stating a general proposition. So I am not committed to the Gricean pragmatic hypothesis that Devitt is at pains to refute. He misunderstands what I take to be the role played by the univocal quantificational meaning of a definite description in effecting referential uses? He asks, “What, according to Bach, *is* the ‘key role’ of the quantificational meaning in the referential use of a description? I take his answer to be that the speaker’s route from the singular thought that *x* is *G* to the use of ‘the *F*’ to refer to *x* in ‘the *F* is *G*’ is via the general quantificational thought that, according to Russell, is expressed by ‘the *F* is *G*’” (17). But that is not my answer.

I agree with Devitt that in the referential case “the quantificational meaning of ‘the *F*’ [does not] help to *make* th[e] object salient, relevant, or intended since it does not *identify* the object” (17). But I don’t claim that it does do that. Devitt asks, “So what *does* supplement the description “to provide the full basis for identifying the referent”? Bach says nothing, so far as I can see, to show how the quantificational meaning of the definite will do that job.” But I don’t say that the quantificational meaning does *that* job. For one thing, as I have long believed (following Donnellan himself), the description might misdescribe, hence not identify, the referent (Bach 1994: 126f). This need not prevent the hearer from identifying the referent, either because he thinks the object in question fits the description or because he thinks the speaker thinks that (or thinks he thinks that). But the hearer

identifies the referent as the object the speaker is using the description to refer to, not as that which satisfies the description.⁶

In the (usual) case where the description is incomplete, the hearer does not and is not intended to take the object in question to be the unique F, since there is no unique F. So the role of the quantificational meaning cannot be to denote the intended referent. What, then, is its role? ‘F’ signifies the property of being F and, as Devitt acknowledges, “the descriptive meaning of the nominal ‘F’ plays a role in a referential use” (16). So that is not in dispute. What about the role of ‘the’? When combined with a *singular* nominal, it signifies uniqueness (otherwise, it merely signifies totality). But if the description is incomplete, there is no unique F. Still, there must be some unique thing that is F that the speaker intends to refer to.⁷ The problem for the hearer is to figure out which thing that is.

If the speaker had a particular F in mind but used an indefinite description instead (and uttered a sentence of the form ‘An F is G’), he normally would not be referring the hearer to that object. His use of the indefinite would be specific, but not referential.⁸ In that case, the hearer could know that the speaker has some object in mind but would not be in a position to know which object it is and, more to the point, would not be intended to think of it. However, in using a definite description referentially, incomplete though it may be, the speaker does intend the hearer to identify the unique F that he the speaker is thinking of. The hearer has to figure out which thing is the F that the speaker has in mind. Now the speaker is not using ‘the F’ as elliptical for ‘the F that I have in mind’ (and it would not be enough for

⁶ As Donnellan pointed out, one can use ‘the F’ to refer to an object that does not possess the property of being F. Being thought to be F, or even just being F-like, can be good enough. But arguably the speaker is not using ‘F’ literally in such cases. For discussion see Bach 1994: 127f.

⁷ As just noted, it must at least be F-like or else be thought to be F (the speaker thinks it is F, thinks the hearer thinks it is F, or thinks the hearer thinks he thinks it is F). In the text I ignore such complications.

⁸ For the difference see Ludlow and Neale 1992 and Bach 2004: 205-206. In a footnote (2n), Devitt rejects the distinction between specific and referential uses of indefinite descriptions, apparently assuming that a little “reference borrowing” on the part of the hearer enables him to think of the thing the speaker has in mind. Devitt complains that I do “not say why there is no reference to borrow” in such cases,” evidently overlooking the explanation I actually gave (Bach 2004: 205-206). Surely one could not be guaranteed to be able to think of anything that anyone has in mind at a given time, simply by thinking of it under a description of the form ‘the thing that A currently has in mind’. Thinking of an object is not that easy (for my view on what it takes to think of an object, see Bach 1994: chapters 1 and 2), not that Devitt thinks that it is. Still, he seems not to reckon with the distinction between thinking that someone has a certain object in mind and thinking of it oneself.

the hearer to think of that thing under the description ‘the thing that he the speaker has in mind’). He must expect the hearer to have cognitive access to the object as well. So, in using ‘the F’, with its implication of uniqueness even though it is incomplete, the speaker must intend for the hearer to identify, by a process of triangulation as it were, a certain unique thing as the distinguished F, the one he has in mind. Devitt is right to say, “If the quantificational meaning were playing a role in what is said by a referentially used ‘the F’ it would indeed imply uniqueness” (16), but he is wrong to assume that my view requires that the referent uniquely possess a certain property. Rather, the speaker has a unique object in mind and intends the hearer to think of it himself, by way of figuring out which object is the intended F.

Devitt further complains, “Bach’s whole case against RD rests on his Point 5 claim that the quantificational meaning plays a role in a referential use but, so far as I can see, *he says absolutely nothing* about what that role is (beyond the role of the descriptive meaning of ‘F’)” (17). Well, as I have indicated, there is also the uniqueness signified by ‘the’ when combined with a singular nominal. Now it is true that I do not explain how the hearer is to identify the specific F (assuming it is an F) that the speaker is referring to. Obviously, the quantificational meaning of ‘the F’ cannot do the trick if ‘the F’ is incomplete. Giving a fuller explanation is part of the general task of the theory of linguistic communication, such as the one presented in Bach and Harnish 1979, which I apply to the case of referential uses in Bach 1994 (chapter 6). The main idea is that in referring a hearer to an object by using a definite description, the speaker normally expects there to be a uniquely relevant and salient F that the hearer cannot but take him to be referring to. The hearer in turn finds a uniquely plausible candidate for being that F, taking into account that he is intended to do so. This is an instance of the Gricean picture of communication, which Harnish and I develop in our book. No doubt there is plenty more to be said on how this picture applies to referring (for a step in that direction see Bach 2006), but that is the general idea.

Devitt goes on to ask, “What *does* provide the hearer with full basis for identifying the referent?” He complains that my “talk of ‘salience’, ‘relevance’, ‘what the speaker intends’, and so on, simply labels the problem without solving it: *In virtue of what* is a

certain object salient and so on? A solution cries out to be heard” (17). But then Devitt is content to equate his own restatement of the problem with a solution:

The object is salient and so on in virtue of a causal-perceptual link to the thought that the speaker is expressing. And *what provides the needed identification is the referential meaning of ‘the F’, a meaning established by the convention of exploiting causal-perceptual links between thoughts and objects*, just the same links that are exploited by similar conventions for demonstratives and deictic pronouns. *The referential use of a definite, like the use of a demonstrative or pronoun, makes the object of thought salient to the hearer because she participates in the appropriate referential convention.* (17; Devitt’s italics)

But which links and to which objects? Devitt does not address this question. Surely he is not suggesting that there is a distinct referential convention for each object that a given definite description could ever be used to refer to.

It is one thing to use a description referentially and another to intend the hearer to identify the referent in a certain way. It is not enough for the speaker to be in a causal-perceptual link to some object and for the hearer to recognize that fact (perhaps this reflects a deeper point of disagreement between Devitt and me). The speaker’s use of a certain description must, in the context in which he is using it, enable the hearer to think of the very same object and to recognize it as the one the speaker is talking about. Moreover, it is one thing for the hearer to recognize that the speaker is using a description referentially and another thing for the hearer to figure out which object he is using it to refer to. Successful communication of reference requires the hearer to make an inference along the lines of the one the speaker intends him to make.⁹

Devitt’s referentialist account does not begin to address this problem. Both his view and mine (or any account of referential uses) requires that the speaker intend to be using the description referentially and that the hearer recognize the use as referential. On Devitt’s view this is a matter of disambiguation. But Devitt does not say how the hearer manages to disambiguate the description, much less how, once he recognizes its use as referential, he identifies the intended referent. Simply characterizing the use as referential and pointing out that it involves the intention for the hearer to think of the same object that one is thinking of via a casual-perceptual link does not explain how the hearer manages to do this. Even if there were a semantic convention for referential uses, a convention for “exploiting causal-perceptual links between thoughts and objects,” this

⁹ For more details of my account of referential uses, see Points 4, 5, 11, and 12 of Bach 2004.

convention would not specify how it is to be exploited or applied in any given case. Devitt has no basis for claiming that this would-be referential meaning “provides the needed identification.” For if there is more than one F, what determines which F the speaker is referring to? Recognizing that the speaker is referring to some F (at least in the normal case) does not get the hearer to the F the speaker is referring to. He may know that the speaker has a certain F in mind, but he still has to figure out which one.

4. Devitt’s further objections

Devitt registers several other objections to certain aspects of my view. I will briefly discuss the main ones.

The historical objection

As I explained earlier, it is not the quantificational meaning of sentences containing definite descriptions but the quantificational meaning of the descriptions themselves that plays a role in their referential use. I tried to explain what that role is – and what it is not. I also pointed out that the quantificational meaning of a definite description should not be identified with its attributive use. Devitt seems to equate the two. Even though Russell’s theory gives what a speaker asserts in using a (complete) definite description attributively while assertively uttering a sentence of the form ‘The F is G’, this does not mean that the attributive use is somehow more fundamental than the referential use, especially if the description is incomplete (this is case on which Devitt bases his main argument).

Devitt evidently thinks that on any pragmatic approach to referential uses the attributive use is more fundamental and that this poses a problem for such an approach.

Then it would have to have been the case that, historically, the quantificational convention for ‘the’, hence the attributive use of definites, *came before* their referential use. For that convention features in pragmatic explanations of the referential use. A person has to be already able to exploit that convention to say the general proposition, in order to convey the singular one. The problem is: Do we have any reason to believe that the attributive use did precede the referential use? (13)

It is clear here that Devitt is again equating the attributive use with the quantificational meaning. Otherwise, why would he suggest that if, as Russell’s theory claims, definite descriptions have exclusively quantificational meanings, attributive uses would have to have come first? But if, as we agree, the quantificational meaning of a description plays a role in the attributive use and if, as I have argued, it also plays a role in the referential use

(the meanings of ‘the’ and ‘F’ do not change from one use to the other), it is irrelevant which use came first. So Devitt’s historical argument has no force against my account.

Devitt evidently thinks that a pragmatic approach to referential uses assumes that attributive uses are to be explained semantically, not pragmatically. He is right to insist that the mere possibility of a “Gricean derivation of the meaning conveyed by a particular use of an expression does not establish that that meaning is not a conventional meaning of the expression; it does not establish that this use of the expression is a matter of pragmatics not semantics” (7n). So he poses this challenge to the “defender of Russell”:

On the positive side, he needs to provide an argument that referential uses are akin to indubitably pragmatic phenomena. On the negative side, he needs to criticize the argument that the uses are semantic, pointing out, for example, how they differ from what is uncontroversially semantic. (14)

However, an attributive use, being a use, is as pragmatic as a referential use, especially if the description is incomplete. Presumably what Devitt means is that the attributive use is consistent with the quantificational analysis of Russell’s theory whereas the referential use is not, hence that the referential use is somehow not literal on the Russellian story and for that reason requires a special pragmatic explanation. Yet he bases his objections to the pragmatic approach on the case of incomplete definite descriptions, whose use, even when attributive rather than referential, involves the speaker meaning more than what he says. Pragmatics plays a role, albeit not the same role, in either case.

Descriptions by default?

Devitt is skeptical of my suggestion that we tend to use a definite description to refer to an individual only if, under the circumstances, no other linguistic means is available or suitable for referring to it. My idea was that if we want to refer to something that lacks a name, isn’t perceptually accessible, hence not suited for being demonstrated, or hasn’t just been mentioned, in which case a pronoun or a demonstrative (simple or complex) isn’t suitable, we must resort to a definite description. So, for example, if something has a name and we know the name and have reason to suppose that our audience knows it too, we will first refer to it by name and then refer it with a pronoun.¹⁰

¹⁰ To be sure, sometimes we use a description instead of a pronoun for stylistic reasons. Also, sometimes we inject a description into a narrative, even when a pronoun would do, to add new information or highlight familiar information or about the subject. This is like using a nonrestrictive relative clause.

The rationale behind my suggestion was that it might help explain why we frequently have occasion to use definite descriptions referentially. The idea was that if we always had other means to refer to particular things, we wouldn't need to use definite descriptions. Obviously we can't refer by name to things that don't have names, there are severe constraints on the use of first- and second-person pronouns, and third-person pronouns can't readily be used out of the blue. Generally, it is not feasible to use a third-person pronoun or a simple demonstrative to refer one's audience to something that has not already been mentioned, is not otherwise already an object of attention, and is not made an object of attention by means of a demonstration. But what about complex demonstratives (demonstrative descriptions)?

Are complex demonstratives and definite descriptions virtually interchangeable?

Devitt focuses on the choice between using a demonstrative and a definite description. He points out, for example, "that the more a demonstration is called for to increase salience, the more natural it will seem to use a demonstrative rather than a description" (19). By implication, the less a demonstration is called for, the more natural it will be to use a definite and, indeed, he describes such a case, in which a speaker uses 'the book' to refer to a particular book among many in a situation where no demonstration is necessary (19). But that is precisely a case in which the referent is already an object of attention, a situation better suited for using a definite than a demonstrative (and even better suited for the pronoun 'it' if the book in question is the only object of mutual attention).

Demonstrative descriptions, of the form 'that F', are commonly used, often with stress on 'that', to refer to a particular F when several are present, and generally this requires demonstrating the intended one. Using 'the F' will not do. Sometimes 'that F', without stress on 'that', is used to refer demonstratively to the only F present. In that case, it is used to direct attention to the F that is present. 'The F' tends to be used if the F in question is already an object of attention, perhaps because it has already been referred to and a pronoun is not informative enough to distinguish it from something else that was previously mentioned, or is otherwise an object of attention.

Devitt contends that "when definites are used referentially, a complex demonstrative would usually serve the communicative goal well enough" (13). He is not suggesting that

there are no real differences between demonstrative and definite descriptions. Here are some fairly obvious differences:

- Only definites readily take restrictive relative clauses.
- Demonstratives more readily scope out over modals, temporals, and antecedents of conditionals.
- ‘That F’ can be used several times in one sentence to refer to different F’s.
- Only definites imply uniqueness.

This last difference is most relevant to the question of whether, when a definite is used referentially, a complex demonstrative would usually serve the communicative goal just as well, or at least well enough. Suppose you see a number of dogs running around in a park and you want to say something about a particular one. You could point to that dog and use ‘that dog’ to refer to it, but you couldn’t use ‘the dog’ to do this. You would have to use a more elaborate definite description, such as ‘the dog that’s chasing the Frisbee’ or ‘the dog with the black spots’. In general, qualifying clauses and phrases go better with definites than demonstratives.

Devitt is skeptical about my suggestion that in situations where a demonstrative is appropriate a definite is not, and that in situations where a definite is appropriate, a demonstrative is not. No doubt this is all a matter of degree and, indeed, there are probably no hard and fast rules about this. So perhaps there is no point quibbling about just which sort of expression is the best choice for referring to a given object in a given situation. Indeed, suppose that Devitt were right to claim that when used referentially demonstrative and definite descriptions are virtually interchangeable. Even then, this could help his case only if demonstrative descriptions were essentially and unambiguously referring expressions. Devitt evidently assumes that they are. Otherwise, there wouldn’t be much point in likening referentially used definites to demonstratives. However, in light of Jeffrey King’s (2001) extensive discussion of non-referential uses of demonstrative descriptions, there is no basis for this assumption.

5. Could ‘the’ really be ambiguous?

Devitt acknowledges that his thesis that definite descriptions have referential meanings commits him to the claim that the word ‘the’ is ambiguous. But this claim is implausible

on its face. For one thing, it is committed to a massive cross-linguistic coincidence (Bach 2004: 226). If ‘the’ is semantically ambiguous, there ought to be languages with two different definite articles, one corresponding to the attributive use and one to the referential. I am unaware of any such language (perhaps Devitt can identify one), but I am aware of many languages with only one.¹¹

Moreover, if ‘the’ has a referential meaning, precisely what is that meaning? Devitt compares the referential ‘the F’ with ‘that F’, but presumably he does not think that they have the same meaning. What, then, is the difference? Also, Devitt does not explain what the semantic role of ‘F’ is in ‘the F’.¹² Can ‘the F’ refer to something that is not F? That is, can ‘The F is G’ be true even if the referent of ‘the F’ is not F? If not, how does being F figure in the semantic content of the sentence? If a pragmatic account is needed in cases where ‘F’ does not apply, then, as Scott Soames (2005) has argued, this pragmatic account might as well be extended to cases in which ‘F’ does apply. But then there would be no reason to posit a semantically referential reading in the first place.

Despite these unanswered questions, suppose that ‘the’ were semantically ambiguous. Then it ought to be possible for someone to understand referential uses of definite descriptions and to fail to understand attributive uses. Just as someone might understand the furniture meaning of ‘table’ but without understanding its tabular meaning, so someone privy only to the referential use of descriptions would understand the reference to a certain man by a speaker makes in uttering “The man over there is drunk,” but would be mystified by an utterance of “The next Pope will probably be Italian,” where the description is used attributively. It is hard to believe that there could be such a person, but Devitt’s view would seem to predict that there could be.

Finally, Devitt’s claim that ‘the’ is semantically ambiguous does not explain the fact that possessive phrases, such as ‘Caesar’s wife’ and ‘Italy’s capital city’, also have both

¹¹ It is irrelevant that in some languages the definite article is marked for gender, case, and number, thereby taking different forms, for these are different forms of the same lexical item.

¹² Devitt misinterprets an observation I made about his neutrality on the precise role of ‘F’ (2004: 292). I suggested that it did not preclude an account of the referential use on which ‘the F’ is understood as ‘the F I am talking about/thinking of’ (Bach 2004: 225). Contrary to what Devitt seems to think (23n), I was not endorsing this idea. All I meant, although I did not make it clear, was that this view is not precluded by his argument from convention. I agree with Devitt that it confuses describing the causal-perceptual link required for reference with exploiting that link.

referential and attributive uses. Obviously this fact cannot be explained by the ambiguity of ‘the’, since it does not occur in these phrases. This fact illustrates the motivation behind the pragmatic approach to certain linguistic regularities, which to seek a unitary explanation for a regularity involving various expressions instead of appealing to alleged semantic ambiguities of specific lexical items.

It would seem, then, that Devitt should account for the referential-attributive distinction in some other way than by supposing that ‘the’ is ambiguous. Here is an idea. Perhaps there is a hidden *syntactic* ambiguity in ‘the F’ at the level of logical form, so that a description can have either of the following readings:

(A) the x such that x is F

(R) x such that x is the F

When ‘the F’ is of the (A) form, it is a restricted quantifier and fits the Russellian paradigm. When it is of the (R) form, it is essentially a free variable, something like a third-person pronoun. And perhaps something like this analysis could be formulated for possessive phrases as well, not that I am endorsing the idea. From my point of view, (A) and (R) do not capture any syntactic reality but merely represent different uses of definite descriptions. In the attributive case the property of being F (or some intended restriction on it or modification of it) determines a unique object. In the referential case, the speaker has a unique object in mind and intends the hearer to figure out which object that is by identifying it as the (intended) F, and thereby to think of it himself.

It seems to me, the above objections aside, that to claim that the referential and attributive uses reflect distinct senses of ‘the’ exaggerates the difference between those two uses. When a speaker assertively utters a sentence of the form ‘The F is G’, he is predicating a certain property of a certain object. It is true that with the referential use the speaker is asserting a singular proposition rather than a general one, but either way the proposition is true just in case the object in question is G. The difference is that with the referential use the speaker has the object in mind (he is expressing a singular thought about it) and intends, by means of the definite description, for the hearer to think of the same object. The speaker uses the description to indicate the referent, not to determine it. In the attributive case the object is determined as the satisfier of the description (or of some obviously intended completion of it). Either way, a property is predicated of an

object – only the role of the description is different. This difference is enough to make for the difference between asserting a singular proposition and asserting a general one, but either way a property is being predicated of an object.

As I see it, Devitt's rejection of a pragmatic treatment of referential uses depends on an overly restrictive conception of what such a treatment requires. I entirely agree with him that handling referential uses on the model of conversational implicature, whether particularized or generalized, does not work, for pretty much the reasons he gives. However, he is too hasty to suppose that implicature is the only model on which to base a pragmatic account. As I have stressed here and in other work cited, the fact that a given type of expression has a certain regular use is evidence for *either* a conventional *or* merely a standardized use.¹³ I agree with Devitt that one should not reject ambiguity claims merely on the basis of Grice's semantic version of Ockham's Razor, for sometimes ambiguity is the best explanation for a multiplicity of regularized uses of a given type of expression. But not in this case.

¹³ I have not addressed the general methodological question of how to distinguish conventionalization from mere standardization. I have addressed it elsewhere (Bach 1995 and 1998), and I have applied it in connection with performatives, hedged performatives, and indirect speech acts in Bach and Harnish 1979 (chapters 9 and 10). In general, standardization is the more economical explanation of regularities but, of course, plausibility trumps economy.

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[reply to Devitt's reply to "Referentially Used Descriptions"]

The Main Bone of Contention

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This time around I will confine myself to identifying the points of disagreement between Michael Devitt and me. I will be brief. As I will suggest, our main point of disagreement goes beyond issues in the semantics and pragmatics of definite descriptions, and cannot be resolved here.

Devitt and I disagree on how referential uses of definite descriptions are to be explained. In fact, "A Note on Bach" suggests that in this regard we disagree on what we disagree about. He says it concerns whether referential uses are to be explained semantically (Devitt) or pragmatically (Bach). I don't think he quite means that. His point is that singular definite descriptions have referential meanings, as well as quantificational meanings, and that this is due to a semantic ambiguity in the definite article. But his explanation of referential uses is partly pragmatic, if for no other reason than that if definite descriptions are ambiguous, they must be disambiguated. And disambiguating – figuring out which way the speaker intends an expression to be taken – is a pragmatic matter.

The semantic-pragmatic question is important if for no other reason than this. On the ambiguity theory, it *seems* to be a remarkable linguistic coincidence that in many languages singular noun phrases introduced by the definite article should have both referential and quantificational meanings. One would expect there to be plenty of languages with two definite articles, each with one meaning, but there in fact aren't. The obvious way to avoid this problem is to suppose that the dual use of singular definite descriptions is a pragmatic regularity, one whose explanation is the same for any language that has a definite article.

At any rate, there is a further reason why, even if the referential/attributive distinction is partly explained by a semantic ambiguity, the explanation for referential uses is partly pragmatic. This reason applies whenever the description is incomplete (there is no unique F). For the hearer has to figure out not only *that* a use is referential but which F the speaker is using 'the F' to refer to. Even if Devitt's semantic convention for using descriptions to refer exists, obviously it does not determine which F a speaker is using 'the F' to refer to. According to Devitt, "A speaker expressing a singular thought about a certain object participates in the referential convention and thus exploits the causal-perceptual link to that object; a hearer participates in the referential convention and thus takes account of clues to what has been thus exploited." But the causal-perceptual link that enables the speaker to form singular thoughts about a particular object and thereby be in a position to refer to that object is not the same causal-perceptual link that ties the hearer to that object and enables the hearer to form singular thoughts about it, including the thought that it is the object the speaker is talking about. The hearer first has to figure out which object that is. And that too is a pragmatic matter.

Devitt complains that I say a lot about what my view is not but not much about what it is. True, I do not spell how the pragmatic story goes, but my excuse is that there is nothing special that needs to be said in regard to the particular case of identifying a

speaker's reference in using a definite description that isn't part of the general explanation for how hearers figure out what speakers mean when they don't make what they mean fully explicit. Philosophy can say only so much in this regard – the rest is a matter for cognitive and interpersonal psychology. I could cite the work of Grice and my own embellishments on it, but that probably wouldn't satisfy Devitt if what he is looking for is something specific to the case of identifying speakers' references with descriptions.

Devitt also complains about my account of how the quantificational meaning of definite descriptions facilitates referential uses. He contends that my account leaves their quantificational meaning “detached” from their referential use. Now he and I agree that most referential uses of definite descriptions are of incomplete ones and that most uses of incomplete ones are referential. But he is not satisfied with my appeal to the interaction between the definite article ‘the’ (in the unspecial case of English) and the singularity of the nominal it introduces to account for the implication of uniqueness by ‘the F’. Given this implication and the fact that ‘F’ is does not apply uniquely, the task of the hearer is to limit the range of the Fs under consideration to one. This can be done either by implicitly restricting ‘F’, as if it were modified with an adjective or a relative clause, or by latching on to a particular F that one takes to be the F the speaker has in mind and intends to be referring one to. Either way, the hearer has to fill in the gap between the semantic content of the sentence the speaker utters and what he means in uttering it. As I suggested in my paper, there is no deep difference in what happens in the two cases, despite the fact in the referential case the speaker means a singular proposition and in the attributive case he means a general one. In either case the hearer has to find a plausible candidate for what the speaker could have intended by using ‘the F’ when ‘F’ does not uniquely apply to anything.

This leads me to the fundamental disagreement between Devitt and me. It concerns what it takes to refer. Devitt seems to take a liberal view of what it takes, on which a speaker's having a certain object in mind and intending to refer to it puts the hearer in a position to form singular thoughts about the same object. There is no requirement that the hearer have any independent access to the object. My view, laid out, appropriately enough, in “What it takes to refer?”, is more restrictive, and does not allow “reference borrowing” of the sort that Devitt apparently thinks referential uses of definite descriptions involve. For me, unlike Devitt, if the speaker has a certain object in mind (by virtue of being in a “perceptual-causal link” to it) and intends to refer the hearer to it, and the hearer recognizes this intention, that is not enough to enable the hearer to form a singular thought about the object. It merely enables him to form a general thought, albeit one capable of being made true by the object in question (in non-modal cases anyway), but not a singular thought about that object. Merely knowing that someone has a certain object in mind in connection with his use of a definite description is not enough to put one in a position to form singular thoughts about that object oneself.

This, I believe, is the basic bone of contention between Devitt and me. It goes much deeper than our dispute about definite descriptions. If that is right, then he and I are not so much going around in circles as at an impasse.