

‘THE ARGUMENT FROM CONVENTION’ IS NOT AMBIGUOUS

Draft, March 2012 — Do not cite without permission

Anders J. Schoubye
Carnegie Mellon University

ABSTRACT: In recent years, an interesting new argument in favor of Donnellan’s (1966) semantic distinction between attributive and referential descriptions has been proposed by Michael Devitt and Marga Reimer. This argument, which seems to be gaining in popularity, is based on two empirical premises concerning statistical frequency of use and processing ease. In this paper, I demonstrate that (a) the empirical observations (while dubious) fail to license the conclusion of the argument, and (b) that if the argument were sound, it would severely overgenerate. The general aim is to demonstrate that empirical observations about (a) how frequent an expression E is used to mean M and (b) how easy and fast M is processed, do not necessarily provide reliable information about the lexically encoded semantic properties of E .

1 Referential Definite Descriptions

Donnellan (1966) famously argues that definite descriptions are ambiguous between *attributive* and *referential* uses. According to this distinction, a definite description is used attributively when the speaker’s communicative intention is *general*, i.e. when the speaker intends to express a proposition about *whoever* satisfies the descriptive content. In other words, a *general* proposition that requires no acquaintance with the individual denoted by the description is expressed. In contrast, a description is used referentially when it is used to express a proposition about a specific individual. In such cases, the description serves merely as a means of identifying the speaker’s intended referent. For example, if the speaker is intending to express a proposition about a using ‘the F ’, the truth of the proposition expressed turns only on whether the object a is G , viz. a singular proposition.

Donnellan’s main motivation for positing this ambiguity is essentially cases of misdescribing. Donnellan observes that when a speaker misdescribes the intended referent, the speaker nevertheless often succeeds in conveying a proposition about the intended referent. On one predominant view of definite descriptions, namely

Russell's (1905) quantificational analysis, this cannot be straightforwardly explained. Russell's analysis predicts that misdescriptions result in straightforward falsehoods, and this therefore raises the problem of explaining why communication is typically unaffected. Donnellan suggested that there is a semantically significant use of 'the *F*' where it is functioning as a singular term, *referring* to whoever the speaker intends. Donnellan argued that this distinction would explain why communication often succeeds in misdescription cases—the descriptions are simply used referentially.

Donnellan's (1966) paper started a debate about the semantics and pragmatics of definite descriptions that remains active today. However, a number of important worries about Donnellan's proposed distinction were raised by Kripke (1977). First, Kripke notes that cases of successful communication involving misdescriptions also occur with other determiner phrases and even proper names. So, if the correct way of explaining such cases is to posit a semantic ambiguity—essentially proposing an indexical use of definite descriptions—this would commit one to semantic ambiguities far beyond what Donnellan originally envisioned.

Second, Kripke showed that cases of misdescribing could in fact be adequately explained by distinguishing two notions of reference, namely what an expression semantically refers to (semantic reference) and what a speaker *using* the expression refers to (speaker's reference). On considerations of theoretical parsimony, Kripke concluded that cases of successful communication involving misdescriptions should be explained using this pragmatic distinction rather than by positing wide-spread semantic ambiguities.

There are additional worries about Donnellan's ambiguity thesis. For example, on Donnellan's proposed view, when 'the *F*' is used referentially, the predicate *F* appears to play no semantic role. One can refer to an individual *a* using 'the *F*' and so express a proposition about *a* even when *a* is not *F*. In such cases, the predicate *F* (the *restrictor*) is semantically redundant, because it plays no role in the truth conditions of the proposition expressed, nor does it have to determine what those truth conditions are. This appears to be an implausible violation of the principle of compositionality. It also has the consequence that an assertion of 'the *F* is *G*' can be *literally* true even when no individual is *F* and it is generally agreed that this conflicts with our intuitive judgments of such cases.

Today, the distinction between attributive and referential uses is widely considered to be genuine, but the objections raised above convinced many that it is not a proper *semantic* distinction.¹

¹ This is obviously a crude exposition of both Donnellan's and Kripke's seminal papers, but since my main target in this paper is a more recent alternative defense of the attributive/referential distinction, I will not go into further detail here.

1.1 A New Argument for Referential Descriptions

In recent years, a new argument in support of Donnellan's distinction has emerged. This argument, *the argument from convention*—due primarily to Devitt (1997, 2004, 2007) and Reimer (1998)—appears to be gaining in popularity. For example, in his recent dissertation, Pupa (2008) states that this argument “undermines [Kripke’s] pragmatic approach” (2008, 108) and “provides a very strong case for adopting [an ambiguity view]” (2008, 109). Similarly, Neale (2004), formerly a vigilant defender of the unitary Russellian analysis (cf. Neale 1990), proclaims that Reimer and Devitt have “presented an intuitive and powerful argument for an ambiguity in definite descriptions” (2004, 173) and Neale eventually abandons his strict Russellian view in light of this argument. Likewise, in “Definite descriptions are ambiguous”, Amaral (2008) proclaims that the arguments against a semantic ambiguity thesis have been “seriously weakened” (2008, 288) by the argument from convention and Abbott (2010) concludes on the basis of this argument that “the weight of evidence appears to be in favor of considering the referential use of definite descriptions to be semantically encoded” (2010, 152). Finally, the argument is also endorsed by Buchanan and Ostertag (2005) who write “there is a conventional regularity whereby a speaker uttering a sentence of the form ‘The *F* is *G*’ means an object-dependent proposition concerning a contextually salient *F*. If Devitt, Neale and Reimer are correct, then [...] an ambiguity theory remains appealing” (2005, 910). In other words, several researchers appear to believe that the argument from convention (henceforth *AFC*) has successfully revived Donnellan's semantic ambiguity thesis.

In my view, this is an unfortunate growing trend as the *AFC* is flawed in important ways and relies on several questionable moves. My aim is therefore two-fold: (a) to expose the questionable moves in the *AFC* and (b) to explicate why this type of argument is generally problematic.

I begin by presenting—in some detail—the argument from convention (section 2). This argument is actually quite simple but it relies on a couple of crucial empirical assumptions that will need careful exposition. After this introduction, I raise three objections. In short, these are as follows.

1. Questionable Empirical Assumptions:

The *AFC* relies on (unjustified) empirical assumptions which do not license the intended conclusion. (sec. 3.1)

2. Overgeneration:

The *AFC* (continues) to commit one to accepting that many widely considered pragmatic phenomena are in fact semantic phenomena. (sec. 3.2)

3. Theoretical Utility:

This (new) semantic distinction fails to explain any data that cannot already be explained without positing an ambiguity. (sec. 3.3)

2 The Argument from Convention

2.1 Frequency of Use

Donnellan took the mere existence of the referential use of definite descriptions as grounds for assuming that it is semantically encoded. However, neither Devitt nor Reimer accept this. The simple fact that descriptions *can* be used referentially does not justify an ambiguity view of definite descriptions, since that, as Kripke observed, would commit us to ambiguities across a very wide range of determiners. However, there is, according to Devitt and Reimer, a different reason for assuming that the referential use is semantically encoded in definite descriptions, namely the *frequency* with which this use occurs. The general idea here is that if a certain expression is used in a statistically high number of cases to perform some function, i.e. convey some content *C*, then there is a strong reason for thinking that this is the *conventional* use of that expression—that it conventionally *means C*. Since referential uses of definite descriptions are ubiquitous, there is thus ample reason to think that the referential use is now a conventional use.

[...] the fact that the referential use of definite descriptions is a *standard* (i.e. *statistically common*) use of such expressions, *does* pose a problem for Russell's Theory. (Reimer, 1998, 89)

In other words, referential uses of descriptions pose a problem for Russell's analysis not simply because they are possible uses, but rather because they are statistically frequent and hence likely to have become conventionalized in the language. This leads Devitt to pose the following question.

Puzzle: given that Donnellan, Chastain, and others have made the frequency of referential uses of descriptions apparent, why are so many philosophers so committed to the view that such uses do not exemplify a convention, or at least not a semantic convention? (Devitt, 2004, 305)

Devitt concludes that there is no adequate answer to this question—the referential use should be considered a conventional use and hence semantically encoded.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that when a semantic ambiguity thesis is motivated in this manner, i.e. by appealing to statistical frequency, the argument does not apply to other determiner phrases. The reason is that the frequency of referential uses of *other* determiner phrases is significantly lower, so there is no equally strong reason for assuming that these referential uses have become conventionalized. Hence, Kripke's objection about proliferating ambiguities is avoided.

As simple as this sounds, this is in essence the argument: Definite descriptions are very frequently used to convey singular thoughts, hence one should conclude that this is semantically conventionalized and that the referential meaning is semantically encoded in the meaning of the definite determiner. Sentences of the form 'the *F* is *G*' therefore often express singular propositions.

2.2 Processing

In support of the claim that the referential use is semantically encoded, Devitt and Reimer raise a worry for purported pragmatic explanations. Since many researchers skeptical of a semantic ambiguity thesis have sought to explain the referential uses in terms Gricean implicatures, Devitt and Reimer point out that there appears to be an immediate problem with appeals to such pragmatic mechanisms.

When a person has a thought with a particular *F* object in mind, there is a regularity of her using ‘The *F*’ to express that thought. And there need be no special stage setting enabling her to conversationally imply what she has not literally said, nor any sign that her audience needs to use a Gricean derivation to understand what she means. (Devitt, 2004, 283)

Standardly, if some content is grasped via a pragmatic inferential process, the speaker must either (appear to) be violating a conversational maxim or the general conversational context must contain information that would prompt the interlocutor to search for an alternative interpretation. Since neither of these appear to be necessary for the communication of singular thoughts using locutions of the form ‘the *F* is *G*’, this raises an immediate challenge for explanations of referential uses that rely on pragmatic inferential processes. In other words, facts about how meaning is processed count against a pragmatic explanation. Given how easily and smoothly object-dependent thoughts can be communicated using definite descriptions, Devitt and Reimer argue that it is just implausible to maintain that this object-dependent meaning is the result of some elaborate pragmatic derivation. Hence, we should not accept a merely pragmatic explanation of the referential use.

[Speakers] grasp the meaning [of a referentially used definite description] immediately and directly because that is the meaning it conventionally has. (Devitt, 2004, 285)

[...] in a linguistic community (such as our own) where [the referential] use *was* standard, it is plausible to suppose that the intended meaning would be grasped *immediately*: that is without the mediation of any Gricean-style inferences. (Reimer, 1998, 99)

2.3 Constraints on Literal Meaning

In earlier sections, I noted that Donnellan’s view had the widely considered counter-intuitive consequence that ‘the *F* is *G*’ can be *literally* true even when no one is *F*. Devitt and Reimer both acknowledge that this seems implausible for the two reasons mentioned above, namely (a) that this is inconsistent with our immediate truth value intuitions and (b) that this renders the semantic contribution of the restrictor redundant. In order to avoid this result, Devitt and Reimer argue that one should

think of the referential use as constrained by linguistic meaning.² Reimer provides the following analogy.

If (e.g.) I say ‘She is tall’, and my intended referent does not satisfy the indexical’s linguistic meaning (i.e., is not a female), then it seems plausible to suppose that, while I may well have *communicated* a singular proposition, no proposition was *literally expressed* (on account of reference failure).

(Reimer, 1998, 93)

So, suppose *a* intends to refer to a particular individual *b* using a sentence of the form ‘the oldest student is bright’. If *b* fails to satisfy the linguistic meaning of ‘oldest student’, then *a* may have communicated a proposition about *b*, but *a* has not *literally* expressed a proposition about *b*. In more generalized form, suppose *S* is a sentence of English and suppose further that *M* is part of the linguistic meaning of *S*. For example, in ‘the oldest student is bright’ (*S*), ‘oldest student’ is part of its linguistic meaning. Hence, if one were to assert *S*, *M* should be part of the proposition literally expressed (or at least constrain what proposition *could* be expressed by *S*). In other words, this constraint is essentially a principle of *linguistic meaning preservation*: The constraint is meant to ensure that if *M* is part of the *linguistic* meaning of *S*, then *S* can *literally* mean *P* only if *M* is either part of the literal meaning of *P* or serves as a constraint on the possible meanings of *S*. So, an utterance of ‘the oldest student is bright’ can express a proposition about Sue only if Sue is in fact the oldest student (in the context). If Sue is not the oldest student, the description fails to refer and hence *S* fails to express a proposition.

Let’s refer to this constraint on literal meaning as the *linguistic meaning constraint* (*LMC*). Adopting this constraint has several advantages. First, the aforementioned consequence of Donnellan’s view that ‘the *F* is *G*’ can be literally true when no one is *F* is avoided. In such cases, the definite description simply fails to refer. Second, there is now no sense in which the restrictor is ever semantically redundant. It plays an important semantic role, namely constraining what the semantic value of a definite description can be. But there are further advantages congenial to Devitt and Reimer’s view.

It would also seem plausible to suppose that the linguistic meaning of every constituent of the sentence uttered must contribute in *some* way (directly or indirectly) to the proposition literally expressed. To illustrate. While sentences of the form *Could you do x?* are standardly used to mean *Do x*, such is not their literal meaning, which concerns a query as to the hearer’s ability to do *x*. (Reimer, 1998, 95)

² Devitt writes: “In discussing misdescriptions (s. 2), I assumed that ‘*F*’ also contributes to the meaning of ‘the *F*’, pointing out the prima-facie implausibility of claiming otherwise.” (Devitt, 2004, 291)

In other words, assuming the *LMC* helps Devitt and Reimer avoid a potential and undesirable consequence of the argument from convention. Let me attempt to illustrate. If mere frequency of use and effortless processing somehow guaranteed literal meaning, one would then be committed to the consequence that the sentences below are genuinely ambiguous.³

- (1) a. Bob kicked the bucket.
 b. The argument doesn't get off the ground.
 c. You have made your bed.

In other words, one could use an 'argument from convention' to show that while (1a) can literally mean that Bob physically kicked a bucket, it can also *literally* mean that Bob died. Yet, on any normal understanding of the notion of literal meaning, that is simply incorrect. (1a) does not *literally* mean that Bob died, just like (1b) does not *literally* mean that the argument is no good.

Devitt and Reimer avoid this consequence adopting the *LMC*: For a sentence *S* to literally mean *P*, the linguistic meaning (of all the constituents) of *S* must be part of the proposition expressed by *S* (or least constrain what *S* could be used to express). But it is quite clear that this is not the case in e.g. (1a): The linguistic meaning of the words 'kick', 'the', and 'bucket' are not part the literal meaning of 'Bob died' (nor do these words seem to constrain in any obvious sense what is standardly expressed by (1a).) These words make no *semantic* contribution to 'Bob died' and hence that Bob died is not the *literal* meaning of (1a). A similar argument applies mutatis mutandis to (1b) and (1c).

This concludes my exposition of the argument from convention as it is defended by Devitt and Reimer.

3 Problems for the Argument from Convention

To appreciate why the argument from convention should not convince anyone that the referential use is semantically encoded, let's begin by examining the two principal empirical assumptions.

3.1 Frequency of Use and Referential Intentions

Devitt and Reimer both maintain that referential uses of definite descriptions occur with a high statistical frequency. However, neither Devitt nor Reimer provide any

³ Idioms such as these are obviously very frequently used to convey a non-literal meaning and several psycholinguistics studies have shown that the idiomatic meaning is processed at least as fast as the literal meaning, cf. Swinney and Cutley (1979), and Gibbs (1985). In fact, studies have shown that the literal meaning is often not processed at all, cf. Gibbs (1986).

empirical evidence for this claim.⁴ Moreover, since different meanings are normally distinguished in terms of differing truth conditions, it is not clear how such evidence could even be acquired. The reason is that on Devitt and Reimer's proposed analysis, the truth condition of an unembedded occurrence of 'the F is G ' (with 'the F ' used referentially) is extensionally equivalent to the truth condition of 'the F is G ' where the description is used attributively.⁵ Hence, the two uses cannot be distinguished by considering e.g. truth value judgments. This then raises the question: what evidence or judgments we are supposed to appeal to in judging whether the use of 'the F ' on some given occasion of use is attributive or referential?⁶

Here it might seem natural to appeal to speaker's intentions. That is, if a speaker has a specific individual, say a , in mind and is intending to convey something about a using 'the F is G ', the use of the description in that case is referential. Given this assumption, one can now distinguish different propositions expressed relative to the relevant intention, namely a singular proposition (when the intention is referential) and a general proposition (when the intention is non-referential). The claim about statistical frequency then amounts to the claim that in a statistically high number of instances, speakers are *intending* to communicate an object-dependent thought using 'the F '. Of course, explicating the empirical premise in this way does not settle whether it is reasonable to accept it on the basis of brute intuitions. But suppose we

⁴ Since appeals to intuitions about e.g. truth values, felicity, grammaticality etc. are standard in linguistics, one might argue that to ask for actual empirical evidence here is overly demanding. But this argument overlooks the justification for relying on such intuitions. In particular, linguistic intuitions are only considered reliable when certain conditions are satisfied, namely (a) that there are reasons to believe that the intuitions of competent speakers (on the relevant issue) tend to converge, and (b) that the theorists, themselves, are a competent speakers. As regards intuitions about truth values, felicity, and grammaticality (where the cases in question are not outlandish or out of the ordinary), these conditions are normally satisfied, and this is, roughly speaking, what makes appeals to such intuitions acceptable methodology (or, at least, this is the justification for that methodology). But when these conditions are not satisfied, appealing to such intuitions is simply not acceptable methodological practice—which is why appeals to intuitions would be unacceptable in, say, biology or even psychology. The important point here is that this justification does not extend to claims about statistical frequency, i.e. claims about language use that do not concern ordinary judgments of cases by competent speakers, but really social-psychological judgments of what people tend to talk about, how they usually think, etc. Here the standard reasons for taking our immediate judgments at face value are simply absent, and as a result, arguments on the basis of immediate judgments seem as good here as they would were they used in biology or psychology. I am grateful to [omitted] for pointing this out to me.

⁵ This is in contrast to Donnellan's view. On Devitt and Reimer's view, 'the F is G ' is true in the exact same contexts regardless of whether it is used attributively or referentially. The reason is the *LMC* which ensures that the speaker has referred (in the semantic sense) only if the intended referent is the unique F . So, suppose a is the unique F , then $G(a)$ is true iff the corresponding existential claim is true, e.g. $\exists x[F(x) \wedge \forall y[F(y) \rightarrow x = y] \wedge G(x)]$.

⁶ I'm leaving a discussion of occurrences of definite descriptions in intensional constructions for later sections. In short, I will argue—following e.g. Kripke (1977)—that the existence of de dicto/de re readings of definite descriptions is not a convincing argument for an ambiguity.

do take our intuitive judgments to be convincing evidence for this empirical claim, does this then—as Devitt and Reimer maintain—provide a convincing reason for thinking that the argument from convention cannot be extended to other determiners? That is, in my view, questionable at best. Consider the following contrast.

Sue and Mary are at a convention for chiropractors. Sue has been having terrible back pain lately and is hoping to find a good chiropractor at the convention. However, she doesn't know any of the people attending the conference and therefore asks Mary for advice. Mary notices that Bob is sitting alone at the round table and as it happens, she thinks that he is a top notch chiropractor. She nudges her head towards the round table and says to Sue:

- (2) The guy at that round table is an excellent chiropractor.

This looks like an uncontroversial case of a referentially used definite description, i.e. Mary intends to communicate a thought about Bob in particular, and she uses a definite description to achieve this end. Now consider the following variation.

Sue and Mary are at a convention for chiropractors. Sue has been having terrible back pain lately and is hoping to find a good chiropractor at the convention. However, she doesn't know any of the people attending the conference and therefore asks Mary for advice. Mary notices that Bob, Bill, and Brandon are seated together at the round table and as it happens, she thinks that they (i.e. each of them individually) are top notch chiropractors. She nudges her head towards the round table and says to Sue:

- (3) Every guy at that round table is an excellent chiropractor.

It is difficult to see a principled difference between these cases. In the latter case, Mary also clearly intends to communicate a proposition specifically about Bob, Bill, and Brandon. It is the fact that precisely Bob, Bill, and Brandon (and not any other chiropractor) are seated at the round table which prompts Mary's assertion. So, the fact that Bob, Bill, and Brandon satisfy the description *guy at that round table* is not relevant to the information that Mary intends to convey. For example, in this case, it would be strange for Mary to say "Every guy sitting at that round table, whoever they are, is a top notch chiropractor". So, one might conclude that Mary has a referential intention (in the sense relevant here). And since it is a belief about Bob, Bill, and Brandon in particular that furnishes the grounds for Mary's assertion, this looks as referential as any case involving a definite description.⁷

⁷ Notice also that the situation here is analogous to the situations described with definite descriptions.

The question that now arises is whether the use of ‘every F ’ in (3) is statistically infrequent or non-standard. Answering that question in the positive surely requires a substantial argument. It is hard to deny that the use of ‘every F ’ in (3) is perfectly normal, and moreover, it is easy to imagine numerous similar situations where the speaker has a number of particular individuals in mind and intends to communicate a proposition about those individuals using the phrase ‘every F ’. For example, just consider the following contrast pairs. For the (b)-sentences, suppose the context is such that (i.) the speaker has a specific group of individuals in mind and (ii.) intends to communicate something about those specific individuals.

- (4) a. I have dated the man drinking a martini over there.
b. I have dated every man drinking a martini over there.
- (5) a. If you’re looking to cheat on the test, the student seated in the back can help you out.
b. If you’re looking to cheat on the test, every student seated in the back can help you out.
- (6) a. The wheat beer that they served today was simply awful.
b. Every wheat beer that they served today was simply awful.

It is easy to imagine contexts where the restrictor F in ‘every F ’ is used simply as a means of identifying the individuals/objects that the speaker has in mind and where the goal is communicating an object-dependent proposition.

In short, there are, I think, strong reasons to be skeptical of Devitt and Reimer’s claim that the statistical frequency of the referential uses of ‘the F ’ significantly exceeds the frequency of the “referential use” of e.g. ‘every F ’. So, at the very least, if the *AFC* is a sound argument for definite descriptions, it should also be sound for determiner phrases such as ‘every F ’.⁸

Of course, one could opt for biting the bullet here, i.e. one could opt for the conclusion that the semantic distinction between attributive and referential uses extends far beyond definite descriptions. But since both Reimer and Devitt emphasize it as a virtue of their argument that it cannot be extended to other determiners, one can only assume that they would not want to bite this bullet.⁹ In sum, Kripke’s worry about proliferating ambiguities thus remains a worry.

Since Bob, Bill, and Brandon are the only people at Table 1, the truth condition of a quantificational analysis of ‘every therapist at Table 1’ yields a truth condition that is extensionally equivalent to a potentially referential use.

⁸ Even worse, I think that it would be easy to show analogous results with a lot of other determiner phrases, e.g. uses of ‘two F s’, ‘exactly six F s’, ‘no F s’, ‘all F s’ where the speaker has a ‘referential intention’ in the relevant sense here.

⁹ It should be said that Devitt defends an ambiguity view for both definites and indefinites. But, he rejects it for other determiners.

Processing

The other crucial empirical assumption made by Devitt and Reimer underlies their argument about processing pragmatic content. As noted in previous sections, Devitt and Reimer both object to pragmatic analyses on the grounds that referential uses of descriptions are grasped immediately and effortlessly. This putative empirical fact is supposed to render implausible the assumption that referential meanings are somehow pragmatically derived, e.g. via implicatures.

I do not want to defend the view that referential meanings are implicatures, but it is important to emphasize the underlying premise of Devitt and Reimer's argument here. Devitt and Reimer are effectively assuming that crude intuitions about how quickly people grasp the meaning of various sentences (asserted in context) yields robust and stable data about *literal* and *non-literal* aspects of meaning. But that such crude judgments could provide reliable data is not only a highly contentious assumption, it is an assumption that a mere cursory glance at research in psycholinguistics reveals to be false. I have already mentioned the data about processing of idiomatic expressions (footnote 3) where researchers found that these were often processed even faster than literal meanings. Ironically, one of the examples studied by Gibbs (1985) is precisely an example mentioned by Reimer, namely (7).

(7) Can you pass the salt?

Remember, Reimer was explicitly denying that the *literal* meaning of (7) is the imperative "pass the salt". Nevertheless, here is Gibbs (1985).

[...] people do not always process the literal meanings of indirect requests, such as *Can you pass the salt* (meaning "Pass me the salt"), during comprehension. [...] it is doubtful that people computed the literal meanings of these expressions during understanding. (Gibbs, 1985, 469)

While (7) is *conventionally* used as a request, Gibbs' experiment reveals that its literal meaning—which is an ability reading of the modal 'can'—is rarely even processed by speakers. So, even though the request-reading of (7) is not its *literal* meaning, the speed and ease with which this meaning is processed clearly provides no reliable information about what its *literal* meaning is. In sum, one cannot simply infer from the fact that some meaning is easily and effortlessly processed to that therefore being the *literal* meaning.¹⁰

Similarly, consider a paradigm case of a pragmatic inference, scalar implicatures, i.e. the inference from (8) to (9).

(8) Bob bought some of the tickets.

(9) Bob bought some but not all of the tickets.

¹⁰ Also, accepting that (7) is conventionally used to express a request does not commit one to the view that (7) is semantically ambiguous nor that it *literally* means 'pass the salt'.

It is generally agreed that (9) is not the literal meaning of (8), but rather pragmatically derived.¹¹ Now, if one consults various experiments on the processing speed of scalar inferences, one finds conflicting results. Bott and Noveck (2004) claim to have observed a statistically significant difference in processing, but Grodner *et al.* (2010) claim to have found the opposite. And while I do not wish to comment on the merits of either of these studies, this does clearly show that determining whether there are important differences in processing speed or processing ease is a rather difficult task that even meticulous experimental designs are often unable to accomplish. I therefore think it is pretty clear that brute intuitions about processing speed and processing ease are not a reliable guide to determining what the literal and nonliteral aspects of meaning are. In short, there is no plausible justification for Devitt and Reimer's processing argument against various pragmatic explanations.

It is also unclear how any experiment could settle this question. As already mentioned, the referential and attributive uses are extensionally equivalent on Devitt and Reimer's view, so how should the processing speeds even be tested? I.e. how would we know which interpretation is being processed?

Finally, *prima facie*, one could think that even in misdescription cases, communication of an object-dependent proposition proceeds with the same ease and quickness as in many non-deviant cases. Consider, for example, Donnellan's (1966, 287) famous case where the speaker refers to a teetotaler drinking water out of a martini glass using the description "the man drinking a martini". Since on Devitt and Reimer's view the speaker has not referred in such a case, the whole issue concerning processing ease and speed seems more or less irrelevant.

3.2 Overgeneration: Other Consequences of the AFC

Consider again (8) and (9).

- (8) Bob bought some of the tickets.
- (9) Bob bought some but not all of the tickets.

It seems perfectly reasonable to assume that sentences such as (8) are frequently used to communicate the more restrictive content in (9). Moreover, the processing of the implicated meaning of (8), viz. (9), is also both quick and effortless (in this case there is *actual* empirical evidence showing that detecting differences is difficult even when using complex experimental designs).

Now ask yourself this: Should we now conclude that (8) is semantically ambiguous? Should we think that (8) can *literally* mean both (8) and (9)? Most researchers working in philosophy of language, semantics, and pragmatics generally agree that the answer is 'no'. However, now note that the argument for referential definite

¹¹ Classic references here include Grice (1989) and Horn (1972).

descriptions is founded on two equivalent premises. Hence, if we assume that the *AFC* is a sound argument for definite descriptions, there is no reason to reject a positive answer to the question above—an answer inconsistent with the widely shared assumption that scalar inferences are merely *pragmatic implications*.

Moreover, notice that while the *LMC* can be used to rule out an argument from convention for idioms (cf. section 2.3), it cannot be used to rule out an argument from convention for scalar implicatures. The *LMC* imposes the semantic restriction that the linguistic meaning of each constituent in a sentence *S* must somehow contribute to the proposition expressed by *S* asserted in context. But that restriction is satisfied above. Each word in (8) (*Bob, bought, some, of, the, tickets*) make a direct and clear contribution to the truth conditions of (9). So, the *LMC* is satisfied.¹²

In conclusion, the *AFC* seems to entail that the very notion of a scalar *implicature* is a misnomer and what is standardly assumed to be pragmatic (scalar) inferences are just cases of semantic ambiguity. The *AFC* commits us to the assumption that there simply are no scalar implicatures.

But the wide applicability of the *AFC* does not end here. Several other expressions that are standardly assumed to carry pragmatic implications should now also be assumed to be ambiguous. For example, we should assume that conjunction is multiply ambiguous between a standard commutative conjunction, a non-commutative *causal* conjunction (where the events described are *causally* interdependent, cf. 10), and a non-commutative temporal conjunction (where the events described are *temporally* interdependent, cf. 11). etc.¹³

(10) Sam insulted his boss and was fired.

(11) Sam bought a boat and sailed to France.

It is very hard to believe that natural language is as rife with semantic ambiguities as the *AFC* appears to suggest. More plausibly, the *AFC* is flawed, i.e. an inference from mere statistical frequency and processing ease to literal meaning is simply not generally valid.

3.3 Theoretical Utility

The last question I want to consider with respect to Devitt and Reimer's ambiguity claim is what explanatory value the distinction is supposed to have. Donnellan's distinction was originally intended to explain successful communication in misdescrip-

¹² The observation that the *AFC* overgenerates and extends to implicatures is also made by Bach (2004, 227). Bach does however not consider whether an appeal to the *LMC* would solve the problem. Bach also observes that the argument from convention (or 'the argument from regularity' as he more fittingly calls it) is easily extended to conjunctions as discussed below.

¹³ Ironically, and contrary to Reimer's claim, the *AFC* can also be used to show that (7) literally means "Pass the salt!" — however, since demonstrating this is a bit more involved, I refer the reader to [author omitted] for a detailed argument.

tion cases, but this distinction provides an explanation of such cases only because it assumes that the truth condition of a sentence containing an attributive definite description is not (invariantly) extensionally equivalent to the truth condition of a sentence containing a referential definite description. A sentence containing a referential definite description can be true in a context where the sentence would be false if it were used attributively. This truth conditional difference is what ultimately grounds the explanation of successful communication in misdescription cases. Yet, this assumption is also what gives rise to the counter-intuitive consequence that ‘the *F* is *G*’ can be true even when no individual is *F*.

When the *LMC* is adopted, this consequence is avoided. However, notice that this (quite reasonable) assumption now renders the distinction between attributive and referential descriptions useless with regards to explaining successful communication in misdescription cases. Given the *LMC*, no proposition is expressed by ‘the *F* is *G*’ when the intended referent is not *F*. And so, in cases where the intended referent is being misdescribed, the speaker has not successfully referred and hence not expressed a proposition. In sum, the cases that originally motivated a semantic distinction between attributive and referential descriptions can no longer be explained.

We are back to where we started because a pragmatic explanation is now clearly needed in order to explain why communication often succeeds in misdescription cases, and this now raises an obvious question: Why not think that such an explanation could be applied more generally to explain *all* cases where an object-dependent proposition is communicated using definite descriptions? Moreover, since on Devitt and Reimer’s view the two uses cannot be distinguished, just having the distinction cannot, in itself, aid us in distinguishing cases where an object-dependent proposition is expressed from cases where a general proposition is expressed—in order to do this, we again need to rely on pragmatics.

In short, it remains unclear what explanatory work this distinction is supposed to do. From a theoretic point of view, it seems that without an elaborate pragmatic story about the communication of object-dependent propositions, this distinction has no explanatory virtues. However, it also seems that once such a pragmatic story is identified, the distinction becomes theoretically superfluous.

3.4 Modal Profiles

It might seem natural at this stage to object that I have not considered or discussed the *intensions* of definite descriptions and to point out that attributive and referential descriptions will have different intensions on Devitt and Reimer’s view. For example, in a two-dimensional intensional semantics¹⁴, ‘the *F*’ will denote the same individual across worlds when used referentially, but (potentially) denote different individuals across worlds when used attributively. One could thereby argue that this shows that

¹⁴ cf. Kaplan (1989); Lewis (1980); Stalnaker (1978)

there *is* a relevant way of distinguishing the meaning of a referential description from the meaning of an attributive description, namely in terms of its *intensional*, or *modal*, profile.

The pertinent question now becomes whether this way of cashing out the difference in meaning is sufficient for Devitt and Reimer's purposes. In other words, if this is the relevant difference in meaning, what can now be explained or predicted that could not be explained or predicted earlier? This, I think, is largely unclear for the following reasons: A difference in intensions is only detectable in intensional contexts, e.g. when definite descriptions occur in the scope an intensional operator. But in such—semantically complex—cases (that is, interactions between modals and determiner phrases), it is well known that scope ambiguities arise and that there are already available semantic tools for resolving such ambiguities. Unsurprisingly, the referential readings of definite descriptions are then easily captured using these tools. Therefore, these ambiguities can be resolved *without* stipulating any *lexical* ambiguity in 'the'. This is well known, but let me illustrate nonetheless: The putatively referential reading of (12) is not plausibly the result of the description being referential, since the exact same type of ambiguity arises with other determiners, cf. (13) and (14).

- (12) Bob believes that [_{DP} the man in the corner] is a philosopher.
- (13) Bob believes that [_{DP} every man in the corner] is a philosopher.
- (14) Bob believes that [_{DP} five men in the corner] are philosophers.

Since there is a mechanism for resolving the ambiguities that arise in intensional contexts, there is simply no need to stipulate lexical ambiguities.¹⁵ Hence, pointing to a difference in intensions is not a particularly convincing argument for positing a semantic ambiguity between referential and attributive uses.

So, the question remains, what theoretical work is this distinction supposed to do? What data is it supposed to help explain? If the proponents of the distinction could point to cases where the referential and attributive uses clearly come apart, but where there are no intensional operators involved, this would provide *some* empirical evidence for a semantic distinction. But, given the way that Devitt and Reimer conceive of the distinction, it is simply unclear that such cases could ever be identified. Heim (2010) (responding to Kaplan on this issue) makes the following pertinent observation.

¹⁵ This point was effectively made by Kripke (1977) in his response to Donnellan. And while it is well known that there are problems with a simple scope analysis of de dicto/de re ambiguities, cf. e.g. Fodor (1970), Bäuerle (1983), Percus (2000), von Stechow and Heim (2007), Keshet (2008), this only reinforces the point made here. The formal tools needed to deal with intensional constructions are likely to be quite powerful which means that capturing the simple referential readings should not pose too much of a problem.

[...] But what difference in linguistic behavior, if any, corresponds to this technical difference [between attributive and referential uses]? Truth-value judgment tasks cannot distinguish the two cases. In making such judgments, speakers contemplate whether a given sentence would be true if the world in which it was uttered had such and such properties. The same imagined world serves as both utterance world and world of evaluation, and therefore the difference between indexical [referential] and widest-scope non-indexical [attributive] meanings is systematically neutralized. (Heim, 2010, 34-35)

In short, when one assumes that ‘the *F*’ can only *refer* when the intended referent is the unique *F*, it remains unclear how one could even identify a (non-intensional) case where the two uses come apart. As a result, it remains thoroughly unclear what the theoretical utility of the distinction is supposed to be. The distinction simply fails to explain any data that cannot already be straightforwardly explained.

4 Regularity+Quick Processing \Rightarrow Semantic Encoding

It seems incontestable that when languages evolve, pragmatic aspects of meaning will sometimes be conventionalized and eventually become lexically encoded semantic properties. As Reimer (1998) observes, the existence of dead metaphors is sufficient to establish that claim. But determining when and how exactly one aspect of meaning transcends from pragmatically inferred to semantically encoded is obviously a very difficult project.

The main problem with the *AFC* is that it relies on too simple criteria for determining semantic encoding. That is, even if Devitt and Reimer’s empirical observations are correct, these empirical facts are insufficient (and likely not even necessary) to establish that a transition from pragmatics to semantics has taken place. The general point is this: the fact that some expression *E* is used with a certain regularity to express some meaning *M*, and that *M* is processed with a certain speed, is not sufficient for concluding that *M* is a lexically encoded semantic property of *E*. If it were, it would mean that we are simply mistaken about the semantic and pragmatic properties of a whole range of expressions in natural language—expressions that even Devitt and Reimer do not believe that we are mistaken about. I won’t rule out that it is sufficient for establishing that *E* is *conventionally* used to express *M*, but even that fails to license the inference that *M* is semantically encoded in *E*.

This now raises an interesting and important question, namely whether empirical observations could ultimately help settle this dispute. I believe that they can, but I also believe that even if *all* the empirical facts were available, those facts alone would not be sufficient for clearly settling the dispute. But this is a complex question that goes beyond the (rather modest) aim of this paper. I leave this for another occasion.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to Derek Ball, Herman Cappelen, Liz Coppock, Torfinn

Huvenes, Hans Kamp, Frank Pupa, and James Shaw for comments on various versions of this paper. I am of course responsible for any mistakes.

Anders J. Schoubye
Carnegie Mellon University

References

- Abbott, Barbara 2010. *Reference*. Oxford Surveys in Semantics and Pragmatics, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Amaral, Felipe 2008. 'Definite Descriptions are Ambiguous'. *Analysis*, 68, 4: 288–297.
- Bach, Kent 2004. 'Descriptions: Points of Reference'. In *Bezuidenhout and Reimer (2004)*: 189–229.
- Bäuerle, Rainer 1983. 'Pragmatisch-semantische Aspekte der NP-Interpretation'. In Faust, M., Harweg, R., Lehfeldt, W. and Wienold, G. (eds.) *Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft, Sprachtypologie und Textlinguistik*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Bezuidenhout, Anne and Reimer, Marga (eds.) 2004. *Descriptions and Beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bott, Lewis and Noveck, Ira A. 2004. 'Some utterances are underinformative: The onset and time course of scalar inferences'. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 51, 3: 437–457.
- Buchanan, Ray and Ostertag, Gary 2005. 'Has the Problem of Incomplete Descriptions Rested on a Mistake?'. *Mind*, 114, 456: 889–913.
- Devitt, Michael 1997. 'Meanings and Psychology: A Response to Mark Richard'. *Noûs*, 31: 115–131.
- 2004. 'The Case for Referential Descriptions'. In *Bezuidenhout and Reimer (2004)*, chap. 7. Oxford University Press, pp. 280–306.
- 2007. 'Referential Descriptions and Conversational Implicatures'. *European Journal of Analytic Philosophy*, 3, 2: 7–32.
- Donnellan, Keith 1966. 'Reference and Definite Descriptions'. *Philosophical Review*, 77: 281–304.
- von Fintel, Kai and Heim, Irene 2007. 'Intensional Semantics'. Unpublished ms.
- Fodor, Janet D. 1970. 'The Linguistic Description of Opaque Contexts'. Ph.D. thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Published in 1976 by Indiana University Linguistics Club and in 1979 in the Garland Series *Outstanding Dissertations in Linguistics*.
- Gibbs, Raymond W. Jr. 1985. 'On the Process of Understanding Idioms'. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 14, 5: 465–472.
- 1986. 'Skating on Thin Ice: Literal Meaning and Understanding Idioms in Conversation'. *Discourse Processes*, 9, 1: 17–30.
- Grice, Paul 1989. 'Logic and Conversation'. In *Studies in The Way of Words*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, pp. 22–41.
- Grodner, Daniel J., Klein, Natalie M., Carbary, Kathleen M. and Tanenhaus, Michael K. 2010. "'Some," and possibly all, scalar inferences are not delayed: Evidence for immediate pragmatic enrichment'. *Cognition*, 116: 42–55.
- Heim, Irene 2010. 'Definiteness and Indefiniteness'. In Maienborn, Claudia, von Heusinger, Klaus and Portner, Paul (eds.) *Semantics: An International Handbook of Natural Language Meaning*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter (forthcoming).
- Horn, Laurence R. 1972. *On the Semantic Properties of Logical Operators in English*. Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles.

- Kaplan, David 1989. 'Demonstratives'. In Almog, Joseph, Perry, John and Wettstein, Howard (eds.) *Themes From Kaplan*. Oxford University Press.
- Keshet, Ezra 2008. *Good Intentions: Paving Two Roads to a Theory of the De re/De dicto Distinction*. Ph.D. thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Kripke, Saul 1977. 'Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 2, 1: 255–276. Reprinted in ?.
- Lewis, David 1980. 'Index, Context, and Content'. In Kanger, Stig and Öhman, Sven (eds.) *Philosophy and Grammar*. D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- Neale, Stephen 1990. *Descriptions*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- 2004. 'This, That, and the Other'. In *Bezuidenhout and Reimer (2004)*: 68–182.
- Percus, Orin 2000. 'Constraints on Some Other Variables in Syntax'. *Natural Language Semantics*, 8, 3: 173–229.
- Pupa, Francesco 2008. *Ambiguous Articles – An Essay on the Theory of Descriptions*. Ph.D. thesis, The City University of New York, New York.
- Reimer, Marga 1998. 'Donnellan's Distinction/Kripke's Test'. *Analysis*, 58, 2: 89–100.
- Russell, Bertrand 1905. 'On Denoting'. *Mind*, 14: 479–493.
- Stalnaker, Robert C. 1978. 'Assertion'. In Cole, P. (ed.) *Syntax and Semantics 9*. New York: New York Academic Press, pp. 315–32.
- Swinney, D. and Cutley, A. 1979. 'The access and processing of idiomatic expressions.' *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 18: 523–534.