

PHIL 332: Philosophy of Language
Class 4: Donnellan on Definite Descriptions

Last class:

1. Some cases that Russell's theory handles but Strawson must set aside:
 - a. The dog in this room does not exist.
 - b. Is that man the king of France?

Today:

2. According to both Russell and Strawson, if there is not a unique F then a speaker cannot use 'The F is G' to say something true: according to Russell she says something false, according to Strawson she does not say anything.
3. Donnellan ('Reference and Definite Descriptions', 1966) agrees that there is such a use, and that either Russell's or Strawson's accounts of this use are correct. He calls this the *attributive* use of 'The F'.
4. But he claims that there is a second use of 'The F' which Russell and Strawson both overlook. He calls this the *referential* use of 'The F'. When 'The F' is used referentially, a speaker can succeed in saying something *true*, even if there is not exactly one F.
5. Examples of the use that Donnellan has in mind:
 - a. The dog next door is agitated.
 - b. Smith's murderer is insane.
 - c. The man in the corner drinking a martini is a philosopher.
 - d. Bring me the book over there.
6. The attributive use:
 - a. If there is not exactly one F, then nothing has been said to be G. He remains on the fence about whether Russell or Strawson's theory gives the correct account. Although he does claim that there is presupposition involved in this case.
 - b. 'The F' occurs essentially.
 - c. The speaker presupposes (in some sense) that there is an *x* such that *x* is the unique F. There is no particular thing that she presupposes to be the unique F.
 - d. The speaker wishes to speak about whatever is the unique F. For all *x*, if *x* is not F then she does not wish to speak about *x*. For all *x* and *y*, if *x* and *y* are both F then she does not wish to speak about *x* or *y*.

7. The referential use:
 - a. Even if there is not exactly one F, the speaker might succeed in saying something true.
 - b. 'The F' does not occur essentially.
 - c. There is an x such that the speaker presupposes (in some sense) that x is the unique F. There is a particular thing that she presupposes to be the unique F.
 - d. The speaker wishes to speak about this particular thing, even if it is not the unique F (i.e. even if it is not F, and even if something else is also F).
8. We cannot tell from the *sentence* that a speaker uses, 'The F is G', whether she is using 'the F' attributively or referentially.
9. Is this an ambiguity theory?
10. Whether or not the speaker is using it attributively or referentially is not determined by her beliefs about what, if anything, is the unique F:
 - a. It is possible for a speaker to use 'the F' attributively, even though she believes of a particular thing that it is the F. Example: 'The smartest kid in this class will get an A.'
 - b. It is possible for a speaker to use 'the F' referentially, even though she believes there is no unique F. Example: 'The chair of the philosophy department lives in Fall Creek.'

So to presuppose that a is the unique F is not to believe that a is the unique F.

11. Is Donnellan right about what the speaker says in the so-called referential cases? We should be careful to distinguish what the speaker says from what the speaker means. Lycan: *semantic reference* versus *speaker reference*.
12. An interesting example from Lycan:

I know that's right because I heard it from the town doctor.