Since Donnellan introduced the distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions, it has followed a pattern common to many philosophical distinctions. Being intuitively plausible it becomes influential, joining the ranks of accepted philosophical jargon. Meanwhile, people start questioning its initial formulation, either seeking improvements or wondering about its significance. Then critics begin suggesting that the distinction is inherently vague or even downright untenable. All that remains is to explain how people could have fallen for the distinction in the first place. Yet as in falling out of love, despite the breakup the influence continues.

Such has been the history of the referential/attributive (R/A) distinction. Donnellan’s account has been severely criticized, as has his claim that the distinction undermines such theories of descriptions as Russell’s and Strawson’s. Critics like Kripke and Searle have denied this claim by showing the distinction not to be semantic, and have sought to explain it pragmatically. I agree that the distinction is insignificant semantically, but I believe it to be genuine and important. I propose to formulate the distinction in pragmatic terms, by working within the framework of a general theory of speech acts recently developed by Bach and Harnish. This formulation will apply not only to definite descriptions proper but also to the common, and commonly neglected, case of incomplete descriptions.

I. DONELLAN’S ACCOUNT

Donnellan contrasts referential with attributive uses of descriptions in a variety of ways. Sometimes he emphasizes the role of the description in determining the object being talked about. Sometimes he focusses on the contribution of the description to the statement made in using a sentence containing it. And sometimes what seems to be decisive is how the speaker thinks of the object he is talking about. I have discerned six different ways in which Donnellan attempts to clarify the R/A distinction and will discuss them in turn. None of

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them does justice to the distinction, but examining them will lead us in the right direction.

First consider Donnellan’s initial formulation of the R/A distinction:

A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so. A speaker who uses a definite description referentially in an assertion, on the other hand, uses the description to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about and states something about that person or thing (283).\footnote{In an attributive use the description determines which individual is being talked about, namely whatever (uniquely) fits that description. In contrast, when a speaker uses a description referentially “to enable his audience to pick out whom or what he is talking about,” he does not intend his audience to rely exclusively on the description, which by itself can determine only the individual that fits it. If the role of a description used referentially is to enable the audience to pick out the referent but not by way of applying uniquely to that individual, just what is this role and how does a description play it? Understanding the R/A distinction requires spelling this out precisely. Unfortunately, Donnellan’s glosses on the distinction tend more to cloud it than to clarify it.}

(1) Donnellan begins with his example of “Smith’s murderer is insane.” If “Smith’s murderer” is used attributively, the statement made is about whoever satisfies that description, regardless of who the speaker may believe that to be. Indeed, if the speaker has a mistaken belief about who Smith’s murderer is, the statement is not about who the speaker thinks it is about. On the other hand, if “Smith’s murderer” is being used referentially, the statement is about whoever the speaker “has in mind,” according to Donnellan, even if that individual, say the man in the dock, is not Smith’s murderer.

Intuitively there does seem to be a distinction here, but does the notion of having someone (or something) in mind really help to explain it? The problem is that a speaker who uses “Smith’s murderer” attributively and has no beliefs about who Smith’s murderer is could still be said to have Smith’s murderer in mind, albeit only under the description “Smith’s murderer.” Although I believe that there is a fundamental difference between de re and descriptive (de dicto) ways of thinking about an object, I would not deny that thinking of something under a description is having it in mind, whatever that means. Besides, Donnellan can make his point without denying this. His point seems to be that a description used attributively determines what the speaker is talking about by way of applying uniquely to that individual (even if the speaker has a false belief about who that is, thereby having someone else in mind), whereas in using a description referentially, one intends to be talking about a certain individual even if that individual does not satisfy the description used. In the latter case the speaker must think of that individual in some other way, and it is that other way which determines the individual being talked about. So the distinction is not between having and not having the individual in mind but between intending to be talking about a certain individual, who may or may not satisfy the description used, and intending to be talking about whichever individual satisfies that description. However, this way of putting the distinction raises the question of how to characterize the difference in content between these two sorts of intentions. Specifically, what is involved in intending to be talking about a certain individual?

(2) Sometimes Donnellan seems to suggest that a referential use of a description expresses a de re belief about some individual; used attributively it expresses a de dicto belief. He is not explicit on this point but his contrast between believing something about “someone in particular” and “someone or other” (299) suggests it. Unfortunately, whether or not he would endorse this point is not clarified by his occasional use of the distinction between believing of and believing that (or the parallel distinction between saying of and saying that). The problem here is that the difference between believes-of and believes-that ascriptions is independent of the difference between ascriptions of de re and of de dicto beliefs. Sentences both of the form “a believes of the F that it is G” and of the form “a believes that the F is G” can be used to ascribe either de re or de dicto beliefs about the F (also, whether the “F” in the latter form occurs transparently or opaque does not determine whether the belief ascribed is de re or de dicto). So if we wish to distinguish the two kinds of ascriptions as de re and de dicto, we should not confuse that distinction with the one between de re and de dicto beliefs.\footnote{Thus, in saying that a referential use of a description is to express a belief about, or say something of, a certain particular individual, if Donnellan means that the belief expressed must be de re, his require-}


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¹ Thus, in saying that a referential use of a description is to express a belief about, or say something of, a certain particular individual, if Donnellan means that the belief expressed must be de re, his require-
ment is surely too strong. For then one could use a description referentially only to talk about an individual one was related to in a de re way (see note 6). However, as suggested under (1) above, it is enough that the speaker think of the referent in some other way, perhaps under some “fallback” description, than under the description he is using. So if he uses “the F” but thinks of the referent under the description “the F” rather than in a de re way, presumably believing that the F’ is the F, should it turn out that the F is not the F’ he could still use “the F” referentially to talk about the F’, though he is thinking of it descriptively (in a de dicto way).

(3) By requiring of a referential use not that the speaker have a de re belief about the referent but only that he think of it in some other way, possibly descriptive, than under the description he uses, we are doing justice to Donnellan’s occasional comment that only descriptions used attributively “occur essentially” in the speaker’s utterance. However, this way of distinguishing attributive from referential uses is too strong, inasmuch as a speaker can use a description attributively even though another description synonymous with that one could have been used instead in making the same statement.

(4) Clearly what is essential to the speaker’s statement made using a description attributively is not the description actually used but the individual concept it expresses. If different definite descriptions can express the same individual concept, and surely they can, then any of them will do. If the speaker is using a description attributively, he is talking about whichever individual fits that or any description he might have used to express the same individual concept. Contrasting an attributive with a referential use of a description in uttering a sentence of the form “The φ is ψ,” Donnellan remarks, “In the first, if nothing is the φ then nothing has been said to be ψ. In the second, the fact that nothing is the φ does not have this consequence” (278).

The trouble with this way of getting at the R/A distinction is that a description can be used attributively even when nothing is the φ. For surely one can use a description nonliterally and yet use it attributively, as in “The next turkey to buy a used car from us may not live to regret it.” Before supposing that Donnellan was talking about literal uses only, note that he mentions examples of descriptions used referentially but not literally. For instance, one can ask “Is the king in his countihouse?” (291), where “the king” is used to refer to a usurper, and where the speaker does not think, and does not believe his audience thinks, this person to be the king. What Donnellan neglects to mention is that the same description could be used, again nonliterally, attributively to talk about whoever the pretender to the throne may be. The same point applies to a nonliteral but attributive use of “the man drinking a martini.” Suppose that the Company prohibits drinking on the job and that a spy is ordered by his boss to go to a certain bar and deliver an envelope to the man drinking a martini: The speaker need not know who this man is — he could be anyone the Company sent — and yet believe, and intend his audience to believe, that the man, whoever he is, will be drinking water in a martini glass.

Even if we restrict our attention to descriptions used literally in utterances of the form “The φ is ψ,” it is not true that if nothing is the φ but “the φ” is being used referentially, something may have been said to be ψ. The speaker, thinking that a certain individual is the φ, may have meant to be talking about that individual, but he did not say, in uttering “The φ is ψ,” that that individual is ψ. For example, if the speaker says “Smith’s murderer is insane,” thinking of the man in the dock as Smith’s murderer, he is not saying that the man in the dock is insane but that Smith’s murderer is insane. He is saying this even if it turns out that the man in the dock is not Smith’s murderer. He would still have been referring to the man in the dock, whom he was stating (though not explicitly) to be insane, but he would not have been saying that the man in the dock was insane.

(5) Donnellan’s point in making the remark considered under (4) is that when a speaker uses a description referentially (but literally), the referent need not fit the description. This is directly tied to our observation that in such a case the speaker thinks of the referent in some other way than under the description used. Only thus can he refer to an individual that the description does not fit, even if he believes the description to fit, for there must be some singular term “d” (possibly but not necessarily a definite description itself) such that he thinks that d is the F. Whereas if the speaker thinks of an individual only under the description used he must be using it attributively, only if he thinks of it in some other way can he use it referentially (not that he must so use it, as Donnellan (290) observes). However, it does not follow that if the speaker does not think of the object under the description used, he is using it referentially. Not only does it not follow, it is false, as demonstrated by the case of incomplete definite descriptions used attributively.
A description "the F" is incomplete if there are many F's. The descriptions we commonly use, like "the door" and "the doctor," are simply not specific enough to be complete, and even specific ones like "the shortest spy," though probably complete in fact, are not semantically complete in the sense of being satisfiable by at most one individual. Those are fairly rare, like "the least prime number" and "the first president of Zimbabwe." At any rate, for our purposes what matters primarily is the speaker's belief, together with his belief about the hearer's belief (and possibly his belief about the hearer's belief about his belief), that there is no unique F, for what the speaker believes will figure in his communicative intention in using sentences of the form "The F is G." Nevertheless, it will be convenient to refer to such descriptions simply as incomplete, since most of the descriptions we use are either obviously complete or obviously incomplete to both parties.

Incomplete definite descriptions are characteristically used referentially, as in utterances of sentences like "The car won't start" or "The teacher is late." In such cases the speaker has a specific satisfier of the incomplete description in mind and intends the hearer to take him to be referring to that individual. The hearer recognizes, as intended, that the speaker does not believe exactly one individual to fit the description and proceeds, relying on what is obvious in the context, to identify which F the speaker is referring to. But incomplete definite descriptions can be used attributively as well. If the emcee of a quiz show announces, "The winner gets a trip to Hawaii," he is using "the winner" attributively, since he presumably does not know (and certainly does not intend the audience to think he knows) who the winner will be. Obviously he intends the audience to take the description as elliptical for "the winner of the game about to be played here," and had he used that description, he would have used it attributively. Having not used it, he intended the audience not to figure out which winner he had in mind but how the description he used was to be completed.

The case of incomplete definite descriptions used attributively shows that it is false that if a speaker does not think of the individual his statement is about under the description he uses, he is using the description referentially. One cannot think of an individual under an incomplete description (though of course one can think that a certain individual, thought of in some other way, fits the description), but this does not mean that one must use it referentially, for one could instead intend the audience to complete the description in a certain way, such as "the F in the room," "the F previously mentioned," or something of the form "the F which is G." All that an attributive use of an incomplete description has in common with a referential use is that the speaker's statement is not determined merely by what he says.

The notion of what a speaker says will be important for our account of the R/A distinction. Since it has already come up in our discussion of (4) and (5), a couple of points are in order now. First, what a speaker says, as opposed to what he states, in using a sentence containing a description is the same whether he is using the description referentially or attributively. The R/A distinction is, after all, between uses not senses of definite descriptions, and as Donnellan himself remarks, doubting that the R/A distinction is semantic, "Whether or not a definite description is used referentially or attributively is a function of the speaker's intentions in a particular case." (297). So which way the description is used affects the statement being made, not what is said (in speech act jargon, the illocutionary act, not the locutionary act). Second, as regards incomplete descriptions, though what is stated is not fully determined by what is said whether the description is used referentially or attributively, what is said is determined by the literal meaning of the sentence uttered. What is said in uttering the sentence "The winner gets a trip to Hawaii" is that the winner gets a trip to Hawaii. Of course, that is not what is stated, which is that the winner of the game being played at the time and place of the utterance gets a trip to Hawaii. By distinguishing what a speaker states from what he says, we can extend to incomplete definite descriptions the point made by such critics of Donnellan as Kripke and Searle that the R/A distinction, not being semantic, poses no problem for Russell's theory of descriptions. For even if the speaker says that there is exactly one F and that it is G, as determined by the semantics of "The F is G," that is not what he is stating, except in the case of complete descriptions used attributively.

(6) This point is directly relevant to Donnellan's remark that on Russell's theory "we introduce an element of generality which ought to be absent if what we are doing is referring to some particular thing" (303). That is why Donnellan thinks that referential uses are not amenable to Russell's approach and why he thinks attributive
uses do not involve reference at all, except "in a very weak sense." However, even if we accept Donnellan's suggestion that this "element of generality" in the speaker's intention is quite different from a genuinely referential intention, nothing follows about the semantics of sentences containing definite descriptions and no objection is raised to a unitary theory like Russell's. But the difference between these two sorts of intentions will be important for our formulation of the R/A distinction itself, construed not semantically but pragmatically, in terms of speaker's intentions.

So far we have reviewed the various ways in which Donnellan tried to elucidate the R/A distinction. Despite their plausible ring they do not really clarify the distinction, but our examination of them will help us toward a more precise formulation. Searle's recent account will be well worth examining also, but first I wish to sum up our discussion thus far by contrasting the R/A distinction with two others, neither of which it should be confused with. This will set the stage for our later formulation.

The R/A distinction should not be confused with either (a) the distinction between not making explicit and making explicit the description under which one is thinking of the individual one is talking about or (b) that between using a description to express a de re attitude about some individual and using it to express a de dicto attitude. Rather, the R/A distinction concerns the relation between the description used or, if that description is not (believed) complete, between its intended completion and the individual being talked about. If the individual being talked about is determined by way of uniquely fitting the description used or its intended completion, the use is attributive; if the speaker thinks of the individual being talked about under some other description or in some de re way and intends the hearer to think of the same object even if that object does not uniquely fit the description used (or its completion), the use is referential. In the latter case the hearer need not think of the object being talked about under the description used or its intended completion (since the object might not even fit); rather, the hearer is to exploit the description in some way in order to identify the referent. It is easy to confuse the R/A distinction with the other two. (a) When one uses a description referentially, one does not make (fully) explicit how one thinks of the object. However, the same is true of using an incomplete definite description attributively. (b) And when one uses a description to express a de re attitude, one uses it referentially. However, one can use a description referentially without intending to express a de re attitude.

II. SEARLE'S ACCOUNT

According to Searle\textsuperscript{12} when one uses a (complete) definite description referentially, there are two aspects under which one thinks of the object referred to. The "secondary aspect" is expressed by the description used, but the speaker is prepared to "fall back" on some "primary aspect" (146–150). In contrast, a description used attributively "expresses the primary aspect under which reference is made" (148), for here the description determines the object being talked about, its unique satisfier. A description used referentially, however, need not even be true of the referent, and the speaker need not believe it to be. Since it expresses only the secondary aspect, its purpose is not to determine the referent but to enable the hearer to pick out that object. This object, which the speaker thinks of under some primary aspect, must satisfy that aspect if the statement made in using the description is to be able to be true. Searle remarks that whether a speaker is using a description referentially or attributively, the speaker is genuinely referring. Contrary to Donnellan, who claims that to use a description attributively is to refer "in a very weak sense" at best (as noted under (6) above), Searle maintains that there is but one kind of reference involved in the two uses. The difference between the two is the difference between expressing with the description the primary aspect or merely the secondary aspect under which one thinks of the object referred to.

There are three difficulties in Searle's formulation, but none is fatal. By identifying them we can avoid them in our own formulation of the R/A distinction. First, Searle is unclear about the role of the primary aspect, under which the speaker thinks of the object. Most of his discussion suggests that the speaker, in using a description referentially, need not intend the hearer to think of the object under that aspect. Even when he says that "in the referential use of definite descriptions one performs the act of referring to an object as satisfying the primary aspect by way of performing an act of reference expressing a secondary aspect" and adds that "one's communication intentions will succeed if one's hearer grasps the primary intention on
the basis of hearing the expression which expresses the secondary intention” (147), Searle does not explicitly state that grasping the speaker’s “primary intention” requires identifying the primary aspect under which the speaker thinks of the object or that this intention contains such a requirement, but he does not deny it either. I should think that in using a description referentially one need not intend the hearer to identify the primary aspect under which one thinks of the object. That would reduce a referential use of one description, the one uttered, to an implicit attributive use of another. That is, in uttering a sentence of the form “The F is G,” the speaker would be intending merely that there be a certain description “the F” such that the hearer is to infer that the speaker is making the statement that the F is G. However, what is really distinctive of a referential use is not that the speaker intend the hearer to identify the primary aspect under which he thinks of the object but that he intend the hearer to identify the object itself. If Searle does not mean to imply that identifying the primary intention requires identifying the primary aspect under which the speaker thinks of the object, he does not say so and does not specify what that identification comes to. Our account will spell out the content of the speaker’s primary intention and specify what the hearer’s identification of it consists in.

The second problem with Searle’s account stems from his neglect of incomplete definite descriptions. When he says that in attributive cases “the expression uttered expresses the primary aspect under which reference is made” and that “speaker meaning and sentence meaning are the same” (148), since incomplete descriptions can be used attributively these remarks apply only to complete descriptions (and only if used literally). However, they can be reformulated in terms of the intended completion of the description uttered, for when one uses a sentence containing an incomplete description, its intended completion expresses the primary aspect if it is being used attributively, and the speaker meaning is the same as the meaning of the sentence yielded by replacing the incomplete description used with its intended completion.

The third difficulty, again easily remedied, is that despite holding that referential uses of descriptions involve two acts of referring, one under the secondary aspect and one under the primary aspect, Searle seems to deny that two statements are being made, one associated with each act of referring. For example, he says things like “The content of the statement cannot be expressed by ‘Smith’s murderer is insane’ for the statement can be true even though there is no ‘Smith’s murderer’ and describes the primary aspect as “that aspect under which reference is made that actually counts in the truth conditions of the statement” (147), thereby implying that in using a description referentially, one is making but one statement and that the description used is not part of its content. I agree with Searle that there is such a statement and that it is made indirectly, since the description used expresses the secondary aspect not the primary aspect, but I see no reason to deny that the speaker is not also making a statement directly. Indeed, it is precisely by using “The F is G” to state directly that the F is G that a speaker states indirectly that the object he thinks of under some unexpressed primary aspect is G. Since Searle allows two acts of referring anyway, one under the secondary and one under the primary aspect, he might as well recognize a statement made directly under the secondary aspect expressed by the description used. And if it is objected that this secondary act of referring is associated not with a direct act of stating but merely with the act of saying that the F is G, the obvious reply is that if “the F” is incomplete, not “the F” but rather its completion expresses the secondary aspect. Therefore, the secondary act of referring cannot, if the description used is incomplete, be associated with the act of saying that the F is G.

III. ILOCUTIONARY ACTS AND EXPRESSING ATTITUDES

Our later formulation of the R/A distinction will be facilitated by exploiting the general theory of speech acts recently proposed by Bach and Harnish.11 Since the details of that theory will not matter for present purposes, it will suffice to present certain of its key concepts. Some of these are familiar, such as Grice’s notion of reflexive intention and Austin’s distinction between locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts.15 Indeed, the notion of reflexive intention helps to distinguish illocutionary acts from the other kinds and is required for defining the central notion of this theory of linguistic communication, that of expressing an attitude. Illocutionary acts are themselves categorized by Bach and Harnish in terms of the different attitudes they express.

Grice’s notion of reflexive (R−) intention figured in his account of
speaker meaning (originally dubbed "non-natural meaning") as uttering something with the intention of producing in the hearer a certain effect by means of recognition of this intention. But what sort of effect? Grice initially thought that the R-intended effect, in the case of a statement, is belief in a certain proposition, but subsequently he took it to be the belief that the speaker has this belief. However, as Searle has observed, either sort of effect is perlocutionary not illocutionary, and acts of meaning (communicating) are illocutionary acts, in which "we succeed in doing what we are trying to do by getting our audience to recognize what we are trying to do," for "the characteristic intended effect of meaning is understanding." As Bach and Harnish put it, the distinctive feature of communicative R-intentions is that "their fulfillment consists in their recognition" (15). Understanding what the speaker means is to recognize the attitude he is expressing, and expressing an attitude is, to generalize Searle’s objection to Grice, not a matter of intending the hearer to form that attitude or even to think the speaker has it. After all, the hearer can understand the speaker without adopting any attitude about the proposition expressed and without even believing the speaker to have such an attitude. Rather, "for the speaker to express an attitude is for the speaker to R-intend the hearer to take the speaker’s utterance as reason to think the speaker has that attitude" (15). Thus, the hearer may have, and the speaker may even realize that he has, independent reason to think the speaker does not have that attitude, so that the speaker does not expect to be taken as having that attitude; nevertheless, the speaker can express that attitude. He can still R-intend the hearer to take his utterance as a reason, though hardly as a conclusive reason, to think he has that attitude (57–59, 289–291).

The type of attitude expressed determines the type of illocutionary act being performed, as illustrated in detail by Bach and Harnish’s taxonomy (ch. 3). Just to mention the two simplest cases, making a statement is expressing a belief and making a request is expressing a desire (that the hearer do a certain thing). In the sense of "express" specified above, the speaker can express a belief or a desire that he does not in fact have and does not intend the hearer to take him to have; he need merely R-intend the hearer to take his utterance as reason to think he has that belief or desire. Any further intentions or effects are perlocutionary.

The speaker’s illocutionary act of expressing an attitude must be distinguished from his locutionary act of saying something. Even if he is speaking literally, so that if he is expressing any attitude, that attitude is determined by what he is saying, still the fact that he is expressing any attitude at all (that he is trying to communicate) is something the hearer must infer. For he could be saying something, as in a rehearsal or a recitation, without trying to communicate at all. In that case he would not be expressing any attitude and would not be performing any illocutionary act. Another reason for distinguishing the locutionary from the illocutionary act is to allow for nonliteral utterances. A speaker might utter "Ostriches can’t fly," thereby saying that ostriches can’t fly. If he is expressing any attitude literally, it is the belief that ostriches can’t fly. He could be making a literal statement to that effect, but he might not be. Instead, he might be making a statement nonliterally, perhaps expressing the belief that cowards make bad pilots.

Since one can perform an illocutionary act nonliterally without performing another one literally, the theory of speech acts must recognize the level of the locutionary act, which provides the hearer with the core of information, determined by the semantics of the sentence used, from which, together with contextual information or what Bach and Harnish call "mutual contextual beliefs," he is to infer the speaker’s communicative intent, i.e., identify the attitude(s) being expressed. The "Speech Act Schema" proposed by Bach and Harnish (chs. 2 & 4) delineates the elements of the hearer’s inference to the speaker’s expressed attitude, whether he is expressing it literally and directly, nonliterally, or indirectly. Relying on the salient information available, linguistic and otherwise, the hearer seeks a plausible candidate for the speaker’s expressed attitude, one that serves to explain the speaker’s utterance under the circumstances. The speaker’s communicative R-intention is reasonable to the extent that, under the circumstances, it and only it is recognizable by the hearer.

As will become clear, the case of indirect illocutionary acts is germane to our account of referential uses of definite descriptions, but let us for the moment avoid examples containing descriptions. If a speaker utters "I wonder what time it is," probably he is indirectly requesting the hearer to tell him the time, so by way of directly stating that he wonders what time it is. It is part of his R-intention that the hearer reason that he could not, under the circumstances, be merely making that statement and that, therefore, he must be performing some further illocutionary act, identifiable as a request to be
told the time. That is, he is expressing not merely a belief but also, thereby, a desire. Notice that an indirect act need not be based on a direct act performed literally. A speaker might utter “I’m glad you’re playing that music so loud,” thereby saying but not stating that he is glad the hearer is playing the music very loud. Instead, he is stating (nonliterally) the opposite, that he is upset that the hearer is playing the music so loud and, by way of making this direct but nonliteral statement, requesting the hearer to turn down the record player. Whether the indirect illocutionary act is based on a literal or a nonliteral direct act, the hearer is to identify it partly on the basis of supposing that under the circumstances the speaker could not reasonably be thought merely to be performing the direct act. That is, he is to reason that the speaker could not be expressing one attitude, that expressed by the direct act, without also expressing another.

For our subsequent discussion it should be noted that the two attitudes expressed when one performs an indirect illocutionary act by way of performing a direct one need not be of different types. Whereas in the above examples, the speaker expressed a desire (made a request) by way of expressing a belief (making a statement), both attitudes (and acts) could be of the same type. For instance, in expressing the belief (making the statement) that it is raining, the speaker could be expressing the belief (indirectly making the statement) that there will be no game today. Similarly, in expressing the desire (requesting) that the hearer answer the door, he could be expressing the desire (requesting indirectly) that he let in Mrs. Jones.

**IV. USING DESCRIPTIONS REFERENTIALLY**

In uttering a sentence of the form “The F is G,” one is saying, regardless of what one is stating, that the F is G. Unless “the F” is (believed) complete and being used attributively, one is not stating (expressing the belief) that the F is G, or at least not merely that. If “the F” is incomplete but used attributively, the speaker R-intends the hearer to identify a certain completion of “the F,” call it “the F,” whereby he is to be taken as stating that the F is G. And if he is using “the F” referentially, he thinks of the individual he is talking about in some other way than as “the F” (or as “the F,”) and R-intends to be taken as making a statement about that individual.

Each of these points will be spelled out below. For that purpose I will assume Russell’s theory of descriptions to be correct, i.e., that “The F is G” is semantically equivalent to “There is exactly one F and it is G,” so that if a speaker says (or states) that the F is G, he is saying (or stating) that there is exactly one F and that it is G. Although I am making this assumption for ease of exposition, I fully endorse Russell’s theory as an account of the semantics of sentences containing definite descriptions. I know of no objection to it that cannot be met by distinguishing the semantics of sentences from the pragmatics of using them. In particular, the R/A distinction poses no problem for Russell’s theory, as Kripke and Searle have both noted, for it pertains to what the speaker states (if that is the illocutionary act he is performing), not to what he says, as determined by the semantics of what he is uttering. Also, I know of no improvement on Russell’s theory. It will be convenient to refer to statements and beliefs that the F is G, where the Russelian analysis specifies their content, as “Russellian” statements and beliefs.

Let us begin with the relatively simple, though comparatively uncommon case of complete descriptions, and later extend our account to incomplete ones. If one utters “The F is G” and is thereby saying that the F is G, if one is speaking literally one is making directly the Russelian statement that the F is G. Even if one is using “the F” referentially, one is still making a Russelian statement – unless “the F” is being used nonliterally, perhaps elliptically for “the seeming F,” “the thing/person commonly thought to be F,” “the phoney F,” or something of this sort when one does not believe or, more to the point, does not expect the hearer to believe that the object one is talking about is F. Our question is what further statement, reflecting one’s primary illocutionary intent, is being made beyond the Russelian statement being made literally and directly. What is the content of this further statement, which is being made indirectly, and how is the hearer to identify that content?

If the speaker is using “the F” referentially, he must be thinking of the individual he is talking about in some other way than as the F. Let us represent this other way as the designator “d”, which may but need not be a definite description, such that he believes that d is the F (or, if he is using “the F” elliptically for a description like those mentioned above, that d uniquely fits that description). However, he is not expressing the belief that d is the F (or that d is G), for that would involve R-intending the hearer to think of the referent as d. As
we saw in examining Searle’s account earlier, in using “the F” referentially the speaker does not have to R-intend the hearer to identify “d”, the primary aspect under which the speaker thinks of the referent (although he might expect the hearer to do this). Rather, he R-intends the hearer to identify the referent d itself, without any specific intention about how the hearer is to think of d or about how the hearer is to think that he the speaker thinks of d. The hearer might think of d as d but he need not. He need think of d merely in some way or other and think that the speaker thinks of d in some way or other. Since the hearer need not, and is not intended to, think of d as d, the most that the hearer need do is think of the right object (namely d), which the speaker is intending, in stating that the F is G, to refer to, and thereby to state (express the belief) to G.

Although we are talking about how the speaker and the hearer think of the object, there is no requirement that they think of it in a de re way. The speaker’s way “d” of thinking of the object might be an individual concept expressible by a definite description, and the same goes for the hearer’s way, call it “d”, of thinking of the object. What is required, rather, is that there be some object that the speaker is using “the F” to refer to (presumably because it is the F), such that it = d = d’. From this it follows that one cannot successfully use a description referentially to refer to nonexistent entity. One could try to use “the man in the moon” referentially (“d” might be “the guy Neil Armstrong left behind”), but one could succeed only if there were a man in the moon or at least somebody whom Neil Armstrong left behind. Only then could the hearer think of that individual and suppose the speaker to be thinking of him.

When a speaker uses a complete description referentially in saying that the F is G, he is making the Russellian statement and expressing the Russellian belief that there is exactly one F and that it is G, but what further statement is he making and what further belief is he thereby expressing, and how is the hearer to think of their content? As with any indirect illocutionary act, the hearer is R-intended to reason that the speaker could not, under the circumstances, be expressing merely the attitude (in this case a Russellian belief) that he is expressing directly. Suppose the speaker utters “Smith’s murderer is insane,” thereby saying and stating directly that the murderer of Smith is insane. If he is making this statement in a courtroom in which a crazed-looking defendant is being tried for the murder of Smith, and if this is mutually believed between the speaker and the hearer and there is no mutual belief that the man in the dock is not the murderer, then the speaker can reasonably R-intend the hearer to infer, and the hearer will infer, that there is some way in which the speaker thinks of (who he takes to be) Smith’s murderer, such that the speaker is stating (indirectly) of this individual that he is insane. Perhaps the speaker is thinking of him as the man in the dock or as the man waving his arms wildly. However he may be thinking of him, what a successful referential use of “Smith’s murderer” requires is that there be some individual whom the speaker is using the description to refer to and whom the hearer thinks of as the individual being referred to. In general, successful referential use of a complete description requires, if the referent is in fact the F, that (E!x) (Fx = d = d’), where “d” and “d” are the ways in which, respectively, the speaker and the hearer think of the F.

What if the individual being referred to by “the F” is not the F (assume that “the F” is being used literally rather than elliptically for some description containing “F”), so that the Russellian statement being made directly is either false or fortuitously true because some irrelevant individual is the unique F and happens to be G? If the speaker thought of the referent only as the F, he could not use “the F” to refer to something other than the F, but of course he would be using it attributively. In using it referentially he must have some other way of thinking of the referent; otherwise, he could not be referring to that object if it was not in fact the F. Let us say that this way “d” of thinking of the object has priority over “the F” in determining what the speaker is talking about. What this means is clear by contrast with Donnellan’s remark that a description can “be used attributively even though the speaker (and his audience) believes that a certain person or thing fits the description” (p. 290), i.e., they have other ways of thinking of the object they take to be the F. But here the speaker’s statement is merely the direct, Russellian statement that the F is G. In this case, even though he thinks that d is the F and even if that were false, his primary statement, the direct, Russellian one, would be unaffected, because “d” does not have priority over “the F.” The only effect, if d were not in fact the F and something else was, would be that the speaker was not talking about the individual he thought he was talking about. Whatever his collateral belief about the identity of the F, he would be talking about the F, whatever it may be. But if he
is using "the F" referentially, so that "d" has priority over "the F" in determining what his primary statement (here the indirect statement) is about, then he can be stating of d that it is G despite the fact that his direct statement is not about d and might fortuitously be about something else. He could still use "the F" to refer to d if d is the same individual as the one that the hearer, thinking of it under "d", thinks he is talking about.

We have insisted that it is not part of the speaker's R-intention that the hearer think of d as d or take the speaker to be thinking of d as d. The whole point of using "the F" referentially is to get the hearer to think of the object one is talking about no matter how he does it. The hearer is supposed to exploit the speaker's use of "the F" to figure out which object is being talked about, and that object need not be the F. Referential success requires only that there be such an object d. Now since referential success is necessary for communicative success and that consists in the hearer's identification of the statement being made, how is the hearer to identify the belief expressed in that statement if he need not think of the object it is about as d? The speaker is expressing a belief about d that it is G but the hearer need not identify it as the belief that d is G, even though this is the belief being expressed. I suggest that this belief is not being expressed fully and that the content of the statement is not the full content of the belief. The speaker's R-intention is that the hearer take him as expressing not the belief that d is G but merely a belief of d that it is G, however the hearer may think of d or take the speaker to think of d. So the content of the statement is not the content of any particular belief but the common content of all beliefs of d that it is G. It is not a proposition but rather, we might say, the class of propositions about d, however d may be designated in each proposition, \(^{21}\) that it is G. The hearer understands the statement being made if he takes the utterance as expressing some belief or other of d that it is G. As noted earlier, this belief about d need not be de re in any weighty sense, for "d" could be merely a definite description.

It would be a mistake to suppose that the speaker is expressing a belief in a singular proposition, the proposition about d that it is G. Even if there were such propositions, \(^{22}\) a singular proposition is not the content of the statement made in using a description referentially. For as just remarked, the content of the statement is the common content of all beliefs of d that it is G. That they are all true iff d is G does not make them the same belief (beliefs with the same content), for different designators of d might have designated different individuals.

V. INCOMPLETE DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS

As remarked in our discussion of Donnellan's point (5) above (in section I), incomplete definite descriptions must be reckoned with in any account of the R/A distinction but they pose no special problem for it. The distinction can be formulated in terms of the speaker's R-intended completion of "the F," such that in saying that the F is G he is directly but not literally stating that the F is G.\(^{23}\) If he is using "the F" attributively, that is the only statement he is making, but if he is using it referentially, then there must be some "d" under which he is thinking of some object d such that he is stating indirectly of d that it is G (using "the F" to refer to it).

This straightforward extension of our formulation of the R/A distinction to incomplete descriptions would require no further discussion but for two complications. One concerns the claim that a speaker who believes "the F" to be incomplete is nevertheless saying that the F is G. The objection is that incomplete descriptions should not be given the Russellian treatment and that, therefore, what the speaker is saying is not that the F is G (construed in Russellian fashion, anyway) but something else. The other complication pertains to referential uses of incomplete descriptions. It is not obvious that there must be some R-intended completion of "the F" nor that, therefore, the speaker must be making any direct statement of the form "The F, is G." Perhaps his primary statement, of d that it is G, can be made directly (though not literally), with "the F" being used to refer to d without the help of any completion that the hearer is R-intended to recognize. If this possibility is genuine, then it might seem that sentences containing incomplete descriptions require not Russellian but demonstrative semantic treatment. I believe this possibility is not only genuine but commonly realized, but I wish to show that no special semantic treatment is needed to account for it.

Unless a description is semantically complete, such that it could not be satisfied by more than one individual, that it is complete is not a semantic fact. There is no difference in kind regarding the semantic contributions to the sentences in which they occur between "the man
who has crossed continents walking backwards” and “the table.” If there were such a difference, then presumably if many men did what Pleni Wingo did and if there existed but a single table, the two descriptions would receive reverse semantic treatment. For this reason alone, I believe that incomplete definite descriptions deserve the same semantic treatment as complete ones—the difference between them is not semantic. And yet it might be objected that when one utters a sentence like “The table is bare,” one is not saying that there is exactly one table and it is bare. The obvious reply is that this is not what is being stated, because the sentence is not being used literally, but it is what is being said. What is being said is determined by the semantics of the sentence used, whereas what is being stated is determined by the communicative intention of the speaker in using it. Since no one thinks there to be but one table, no one would use the sentence literally.

It might be objected further, however, that something must be wrong with any semantic account of a sentence if, given our beliefs, we never use it literally. Surely, it might be insisted, every sentence must have a literal use. Of course every sentence can be used literally but any sentence which is obviously false, which no one would even believe anyone else to believe, is a sentence that if used at all would not be used literally. For example, if someone uttered “Mice are bigger than elephants,” he could hardly expect to be taken literally; instead, he might be stating nonliterally that small people have more character than large people. More to the present point, there are many sentences which are almost always used nonliterally as elliptical for other sentences. For example, “Ed doesn’t look tired, he is tired” would likely be used with a suppressed “merely” before “look” to be inferred by the hearer, since the speaker would not be stating that Ed does not look tired but is tired anyway. Similarly, if I say “I drink only Scotch,” I would be stating not that I drink nothing but Scotch but merely that the only liquor I drink is Scotch (I could state this even by uttering “I only drink Scotch,” which taken literally would mean that I do nothing else in life but drink Scotch). The phenomenon of elliptical speech is commonplace; indeed, it often seems stilted not to suppress words that can easily be inferred as expressing part of what one means, as opposed to what the uttered sentence means. Using incomplete definite descriptions elliptically for their R-intended completions is just another case of this familiar phenomenon.

At this point the last-ditch objection to a Russellian treatment of incomplete descriptions might be that sometimes there is no identifiable completion of the description used. This is why Kripke suspects that Russell’s theory “ultimately fails” and conjectures that they should be treated as demonstrative descriptions like “that table.” But the absence of an R-intended completion of a description like “the table” in a particular use requires no such demonstrative reading, countenance of which would exemplify what Kripke himself deplores as “the lazy man’s approach in philosophy to posit ambiguities when in trouble.” All that the absence of an R-intended completion shows is that the speaker, in using a sentence like “The table is bare,” is not making any direct Russellian statement involving some completion of “the table.” Instead, he is using “the table” referentially in uttering “The table is bare” to make his statement about a certain individual, presumably a table, that it is bare. The act of referring is achieved either ostensively, if there is some one table at hand, or anaphorically, if a certain table were already under discussion. Notice that the demonstrative treatment, even if not symptomatic of semantic laziness, cannot account for these referential uses anyway. For whatever the details of such a treatment, surely the sentence “This table is bare” cannot be true in a given context of utterance if the object referred to is not in fact a table. And yet one can use “the table” referentially (or “this table”) to refer to a certain object and make a statement about it (like “The table is bare”) even if it is not in fact a table but, say, a trunk. The unitary Russellian treatment of incomplete descriptions has no trouble handling such cases, since a speaker who uses “the table” referentially in making a statement of a certain object that it is bare is not, on our account, making his statement literally anyway.

Thus, the R/A distinction applies to incomplete definite descriptions as well as to complete ones, and neither the distinction itself nor the existence of incomplete descriptions poses any problem for Russell’s theory. Speakers (and hearers) are unlikely to mistake incomplete descriptions for complete ones and so are likely to use sentences containing them nonliterally, in which case what is stated is different from what is said. The distinction between illocutionary and locutionary acts is required by the theory of speech acts generally, and whereas Russell’s theory applies to the contents of locutionary acts, the R/A distinction applies to the contents of illocutionary acts.
VI. LOOSE ENDS: NEAR MISSES, MISFITS, AND FALLOUTS

Our examination of the R/A distinction would not be complete without mention of these three topics. First there is the case of an attributive “near misses” which Donnellan mentions in connection with his point that referential uses can succeed even when the description does not fit the referent. For example, one utters “Smith’s murderer is insane” without realizing that Smith died not from the assault but from heart failure. Donnellan concedes that a true statement was made, not about Smith’s murderer but about Smith’s assailant, but denies that “Smith’s murderer” was used referentially, even though it is used as if it were. The speaker did not have anyone in particular in mind. He was not aiming at a “particular target,” says Donnellan, but at “some target or another.” I do not know what it is to aim at some target or other, but I take it that Donnellan’s point is that the speaker had no individual in mind but rather some property, which the description used did not quite express. So if a true statement was made using “Smith’s murderer is insane,” it was not made quite literally. However, I would deny that a true statement was made at all. Not realizing how Smith died, the speaker made a false statement. Apprised of the facts, he might say, “What I meant was that Smith’s assailant is insane,” but that would not be literally true. Given his ignorance, he meant what he said. Had he known how Smith died, he would have said — and meant — that Smith’s assailant was insane.

Referential uses can succeed even when the description does not fit the referent, but this is not to deny that the speaker is saying and thereby directly stating that the F is G in making his indirect statement about a certain individual he thinks of as “d”. He is making this direct statement even if he does not hold the belief he is expressing but believes that the hearer thinks of d that it is the F, in which case he would be exploiting what he takes to be the hearer’s false belief. He is not stating that the F is G only if, taking it to be obvious that he could not mean “the F” literally, he is using it elliptically for some R-intended completion of “the F” or for some other description containing “F” like “the apparent F” or “what people suppose to be the F.” The interesting case of misfits is when the speaker is using “the F” literally and does believe that d is the F. Then, in using it referentially he is talking about d even if it is not the F, for relative to his primary statement “d” has priority over “the F.” Even though his direct literal statement is false (or fortuitously true) because of the misfit, he can still make an indirect statement, indeed a true statement, of d that it is G. Our account of referential uses sought to explain how this is possible, but some questions remain. What if there is no unique “d” but several ways in which the speaker thinks of the object he is referring to? If it turns out that they do not apply to the same object, what determines which one he is prepared to fall back on, hence which object he is talking about? And why do we not always express the way in which we are thinking about the object we are talking about instead of using a description referentially?

A speaker may have many ways of thinking about the object he is talking about, any one of which he is prepared to fall back on if the object is not in fact the F. There may be no unique “d” under which he thinks of it, but all of these “d,” through “d,” have priority over “the F” in his statement. Thus, he believes that d, . . . , d, even if he is prepared to give up the belief that d,. . . , d = the F. But what if it is false that d, . . . , d? The problem seems to be that in such a case not only does the speaker not know what he is talking about, he does not know what he is thinking about! The solution, it seems to me, lies in developing a notion of priority that applies to thoughts rather than to statements. If some of the “d,” have priority over all the others and all apply to the same individual, then the speaker is talking about and thinking about that individual. Here I will not try to work out a solution to this problem, which is familiar from recent discussions about reference, names, and identifying descriptions.
adequate theory of what it is to think about an individual must solve this problem, explaining how priorities for different designators of what one takes to be the same object are determined. My suspicion is that even relative to the overall beliefs of a given person, these priorities are not absolute but depend on the nature of the reasons that arise for giving up the belief that they all designate the same object. As far as the theory of reference is concerned, we need not solve this problem but can say that in using a description referentially (or for that matter, in using a name or a pronoun to refer), unless the designators having greatest priority in one’s thinking pick out the same object (or only one has greatest priority), one’s act of referring cannot succeed, since there is no unique object one is thinking about, much less talking about.

Why do we ever use descriptions referentially rather than make explicit how we are thinking of what we are talking about? For one thing, we may be thinking of it primarily in a de re way rather than descriptively. For another, we may be thinking of it indifferently under many descriptions, all of which we take to be satisfied by the same individual. But the main reason is that in trying to communicate we need to use a description that enables the hearer to pick out the individual we are talking about, just as Donnellan observed originally. Just how does not matter so long as it works. If we are thinking of an object in a de re way or under various descriptions and believe it to be (or to seem to the hearer to be) the F (or the F’s, we will use “the F” to refer to it because even though “the F” (or “the F’s”) does not have priority in our thinking about the object, it is easier for the hearer to identify the object by means of “the F,” because the object is visibly or otherwise obviously the F (or the F’s). Our own ways of thinking of the object may have priority for us but might be cumbersome to express and not readily usable by the hearer. As noted, successful reference to an object requires thinking of a certain object. Just what that consists in is, as is customary to say at the end of a paper, a topic for another paper.

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NOTES

1 Keith Donnellan, ‘Reference and Definite Descriptions,’ Philosophical Review 75(1966), 281-304.
2 Saul Kripke, ‘Speaker’s Reference and Semantic Reference,’ Midwest Studies in

4 As Donnellan notes, the distinction applies to speech acts generally, but he focusses for ease of exposition on statements, as will we.
5 All references in this section are to Donnellan, op. cit.
6 The de re de dicto distinction for ascensions should not lead one to think that there is no such distinction for beliefs themselves, contrary to Searle, op. cit., 157–161, and Daniel Dennett, ‘Beyond Belief,’ in Andrew Woodfield, ed., Thought and Object, Oxford University Press, Oxford, forthcoming. A powerful case for it has been made by Tyler Burge ‘Belief De Re,’ Journal of Philosophy 74 (1977), 338–362. I attempt to formulate it for the central case of perceptual belief in ‘De Re Belief and Methodological Solipsism’ to appear in Woodfield’s volume. Here the following will have to suffice. A belief about an object d is de dicto just in case the content of the belief is of the form, “The F is…” and d is the unique F. A belief about d is de re only if the subject element of content in the belief is suitably related causally to d. In the above paper I focus on the case in which this element is a percept of d. Notice that nothing in this distinction between beliefs says anything about the form of their ascription.
7 This point is made by Brian Loar, ‘The Semantics of Singular Terms,’ Philosophical Studies 30 (1976), 353–377, who suggests further, but without full explanation, that attributive uses are “generalizing” while referential uses are “identifying.”
8 As is pointed out by Searle, op. cit., pp. 153–154, there is little to be gained from Donnellan’s suggestion that only attributive uses take “whoever” (or “whatever”) clauses, whose applicability depends not on how the description is used but on contextually relevant interests. So nothing weighty should be inferred by our use of such a clause here and occasionally later.
9 Sometimes these definite descriptions are called “improper” or “indefinite definite descriptions.”
10 It will be important later to realize that except for semantically complete descriptions, whether or not a description is complete is not a semantic question but a factual one.
12 All references in this section are to Searle, op. cit.
13 Op. cit. All references to Bach and Harnish in this section are to this work.
18 Bach and Harnish specify further that in making a statement one also expresses the intention that the hearer have the belief expressed (42) and that in making a request one also expresses the intention that the hearer perform the desired action at least partly because of the desire (47), but these further conditions will not affect the present discussion.
For both reasons Searle's rejection of the locutionary act is unwarranted. See his 'Austin on Locutionary and Illocutionary Acts,' Philosophical Review 77 (1968), 405-424.


Another apparent threat to Russell's theory is the case of definite descriptions being used anaphorically, as in "A philosopher/Heidegger objected vociferously. The philosopher complained that his theory was completely misunderstood." In my view, the relation between "the philosopher" and "A philosopher" (or "Heidegger") is not grammatical but pragmatic: it is being used elliptically for "the philosopher just mentioned" and falls under our general treatment of incomplete definite descriptions. Now consider "Swiftly suggested stealing a car and using the car to make their getaway." Here "the car" is not being used elliptically for "the car just mentioned," inasmuch as no car was just mentioned, but for "the car they would steal" (whichever car it might turn out to be). Again we have a case of using an incomplete description elliptically, but this time there is a different R-intended completion.

This should be qualified for the case of de re beliefs, since they are not propositional, as Burge, op. cit., has shown. Subsequent critics of de re belief, such as Dennett, op. cit., seem not to have appreciated this fundamental point. I offer a nonpropositional account of the contents of perceptual beliefs in my 'De Re Belief and Methodological Solipsism'.

If propositions are contents of thoughts, there are not, as deftly shown by Stephen Schiffer, 'The Basis of Reference,' Erkenntnis 13 (1978), 171-206, because the contents of thoughts of objects must include modes of presentation. In 'De Re Belief and Methodological Solipsism' I argue that this does not lead to Schiffer's conclusion that there are no irredoubtable de re beliefs about physical objects (other than oneself).

This and many of the following points apply also to nonliteral uses of "the F" as elliptical for some description containing "F".

Many kinds of sentences ordinarily used nonliterally or indirectly, including those used elliptically for others, are discussed in Bach and Harnish, op. cit., chs. 9 and 10.

They show how these cases can be handled neatly in pragmatic terms, without the theoretical contortions displayed in semantic treatments.


Kripke, op. cit., p. 268.

'Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again,' Philosophical Review 77 (1968), 209.

Warren Ingher has pointed out that most of this discussion, regardless of which side is taken, has assumed that a user of a name (which allegedly must have descriptive backing) must have that descriptive backing in mind at the time. See his 'The Descriptive View of Referring: Its Problems and Prospects,' Journal of Philosophy 76 (1979), 725-738. I am making no such assumption here but recognize the need for an account of priority in thought that does not require this assumption.

In my view, following Loar's suggestion, op. cit., p. 370, a name "N" is semantically equivalent to the often incomplete definite description "the bearer of 'N'." In 'What's in a Name,' Australian Journal of Philosophy (to appear), I argue that the seeming rigidity of names is due to the referentiality of our implicit uses of such descriptions.