A PLEA FOR (PURELY) SINGULAR PROPOSITIONS: THE CASES OF BELIEF CORRECTION AND *DE RE* ATTITUDE REPORTS*

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Abstract

In this paper I assume that it is reasonable to claim, as Michael Devitt does, that a definite description can express, in certain contexts, a genuinely referential meaning, but I discuss the requisite, also defended by Devitt, that the predicates involved in the description at stake should apply to the referred object. In so doing, I consider some cases of sentences containing definite descriptions constituted by general terms that, strictly speaking, don't apply to the intended object but are nonetheless intuitively true. Along these lines, in the last paragraphs, I suggest that the role of the predicative material of a referential definite description can be regarded as secondary or instrumental, a mere guide to the identification of the object referred to.

KEY WORDS: Definite description; Referential meaning; Singular proposition.

Resumen

En el presente trabajo parto de asumir que es razonable sostener, como propone Michael Devitt, que una descripción definida puede expresar, en ciertos contextos, un significado genuinamente referencial para luego discutir el requisito, también defendido por Devitt, de que los predicados que constituyen la descripción en cuestión deban aplicarse al objeto referido. Para hacerlo, considero ejemplos de oraciones que contienen descripciones definidas constituidas por términos generales que, en sentido estricto, no se aplican al objeto pretendido, pero que pueden ser consideradas intuitivamente verdaderas. Siguiendo este enfoque, en los párrafos finales, sugiero que el papel del material predicativo que constituye una descripción definida referencial debe ser considerado secundario e instrumental, una mera guía para la identificación del objeto referido.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Descripción definida; Significado referencial; Proposición singular.

In his papers "A Case for Referential Descriptions" and "Referential Descriptions and Conversational Implicatures", Michael Devitt defends

an analysis of definite descriptions according to which they can be considered as bearers of a genuinely referential meaning. By so doing, he is opposed to those philosophers –i.e., Neale and Bach– taking the referential role of a definite description to be not a semantic *phenomenon* but one of a pragmatic order. In this framework, definite descriptions are not semantically ambiguous and, therefore, there is no dual semantics for that kind of expressions. The position defended by Devitt, in contrast, in as far as it is committed to the ambiguity theory, combines the Russellian analysis –to cash out the attributive meaning- with a referentialist semantics– to be applied to the referential one.

However, according to Devitt, the proposition expressed by means of a statement containing a referential description is constituted not merely by the object and the property ascribed to it by the predicate –paradigmatically under the form *Fa*– but instead by a combination of the properties mentioned in the description and the identity between them and the referentially intended object– to which the speaker is, according to Devitt, perceptual-causally linked. It is a requisite derived from the contribution made by the properties mentioned in the description that the corresponding predicates should apply to the intended object. Notice, then, that the speaker, in case of having mistaken beliefs about the object of her referential intention, will not succeed in referring to it by means of a description.

Now, even when I believe that it is reasonable to claim that a definite description can express, in certain contexts, a genuinely referential *meaning*, the requisite that the predicates involved should apply to the referred object seems to me to be excessive.

Consider the following case:

(1) The star that is first seen in the evening is actually a planet and it's called 'Venus'

It doesn't seem too farfetched to suppose that a teacher may try to correct the mistaken beliefs of her students regarding Venus by asserting something along the lines of (1). Now, the efficacy of such an assertion –the fact that it serves as an adequate means for the correction of certain mistaken beliefs– depends on conceding that 'the star that is first seen in the evening' refers to Venus. That is, even when the description involves a predicate that does not apply to Venus –namely, the predicate 'is a star seen in the evening before than any other'–, it is referentially successful, which explains why (1) seems to be intuitively true, beyond any reasonable doubt.

Moreover, the speaker appears to decide to use a certain description rather than any other on the basis of how she takes her audience to conceive of the intended object. In other words, her own grasp of the properties that her audience attributes to the object in question is the standard criterion for the speaker's choice of a certain description. In cases of correction of the frame of inter-ascribed beliefs, as the above one, the speaker can even choose predicates that she knows not to apply to the object at stake at all. That is, generally speaking, the selection of the properties that determine the predicative material follows a *deferential criterion:* in order to allow for the correct identification of the object of her referential intention, the hearer's belief-frame has priority over the speaker's own.

Summarizing, the previous example is intended to emphasize that the predicate constitutive of a referential description serves to contribute to the conveyance of a singular thought –namely, the thought constituted by the object referred to and the property or properties ascribed to it by means of the sentence predicate.[1] If this is so, the role of the predicative material of a referential description can be regarded as secondary or instrumental –analogous to the role played by the demonstration associated with an impure demonstrative in Kaplan's theory: just a guide for the identification of the object involved in the respective singular proposition.

Consider now the following example:

(2) The evening star is not a star

or the more literary

(3) Your father is not your father

My take is that intuitively both (2) and (3) allow for readings according to which they do not express huge contradictions: they say, of a certain object, that it doesn't possess a certain property. In other words, in uttering them, the speaker is trying to correct some of the hearer's beliefs, more precisely, the ones used in the identification of the object referred to in each case. But if the properties expressed by the predicative material of the descriptions were part, in each case, of the propositional content of the corresponding statement, such readings would be blocked.

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[1] Following Devitt's proposal, it can be considered, for example, that the object in question is identified by means of a perceptual kind of device.

It is still necessary, however, to explain why some examples as the preceding ones do look, at least *prima facie*, contradictory. I think that such an impression is grounded, at the very least, on the following two points: (i) the fact that the predicative material of the definite description involves the very same property that the sentence predicate is aimed to deny; and (ii) the open possibility of expressing, by means of the same sentence-type, an existentially quantified, general proposition. If that were the case, the sentence would be necessarily false. In other words, it is just the attributive interpretation of the corresponding description that gives rise to a contradictory statement. Beyond these considerations, I think that the thesis that the properties correlated with the predicative material are no part of the proposition expressed can be grounded on the fact that there are intuitively true readings of sentences such as (2) and (3); therefore, it doesn't seem plausible to take them to be denying the identity of an object with respect to itself.

At this point, it is interesting to notice that some attitude reports also serve to exemplify the thesis that the role of the predicative material is just that of allowing for the identification of a particular object constitutive of a singular proposition: in them, referential descriptions are assumed to be co-referential with other singular terms (such as the typical ones, names and demonstratives), which they serve to substitute.

For instance, let us suppose that Mary said, pointing at the blond Sarah,

(4) She is cruel

On the assumption that Mary does not know Sarah to be the blondest girl in town, I may report her saying by means of the following *de re* true attitude ascription:

(5) Mary said that the blondest girl in town was cruel

Note, by the way, that these substitutions of a referential instrument for a different one seem to be quite common moves within our linguistic practice. Take the case of

(6) That has been broken

accompanied by a pointing gesture, being replaced by

(7) The first chair in the fourth row has been broken

The only requirement that it is taken into account to evaluate the semantic adequacy of these substitutions is the identity of the involved object: the properties correlated with the predicative material do not seem to play any semantic role. As I pointed out some lines above, they are just used as instruments allowing for a correct identification of the corresponding object in the respective context of utterance. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that if what is expressed were a general –or a mixed– proposition we wouldn't be entitled to such substitutions. Notice, on the other hand, that a report that did mention the property expressed by the grammatical predicate –'has been broken' in (6) above– would not be considered intuitively correct.

In sum, if the property mentioned in a referential description were part of the proposition expressed by the corresponding statement, the substitution wouldn't be thought of either, as it actually happens, as determining an intuitively semantically equivalent statement.

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Summarizing my stance, both cases such as (1), (2) and (3) above –namely, cases in which a statement is made with the aim of correcting certain mistaken beliefs of the hearer's– and cases such as the previous (5) and (7) –namely, cases where a referential description is used in substitution of a typical referential device, co-referential with it–, give grounds to the thesis that the role of the predicative material is just that of allowing for the identification of an object constitutive of the singular proposition that is being both expressed and conveyed.

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