

The essence of reference

People use words and concepts to refer to things. There are agents who refer, there are acts of referring, and there are tools to refer with: words and concepts. Reference is a relation between people and things, and also between words or concepts and things, and perhaps it involves all three things at once (I refer to Aristotle using the word “Aristotle”). It is not just any relation between an action or word and a thing; the list of things which can refer, people, words and concepts, is probably not complete (scenes in more recent movies can refer to scenes in less recent movies); and a complete account would need to speak of cases in which the reference relation seems to involve three terms in a different way from the one already mentioned (for such uses, *I refer you to the OED*). In the philosophy of language, it has been customary to think of reference as a two place relation, with some object as the second term and a word or phrase as the first. Even if one believes that any such relation comes into existence thanks to the referential activities of speakers, one can hardly deny that it obtains. This relation is the topic of this essay.

What is the essence of reference? Perhaps there is no essence.¹ Perhaps our notion of reference, even as used in philosophical theorizing, is too vague to have an essence, or else it bundles together a number of similar but distinct relations. If this were so, the concept of a *referring expression* would have no place in the best semantic description of a language: such a concept would be too vague, or would wrongly assimilate expressions with a number of distinct semantic functions. I reject such views, because I think that there is an essence: it is (I shall argue) constitutive of being a referring expression that how things are with its actual referent, if any, is what matters to the truth or falsehood, with respect to any world, of a range of sentences or utterances in which it occurs. The remainder of this essay leads up to this conclusion.

In the previous paragraph, there was a natural transition from a question about the essence of reference to a question about what makes something a referring expression. An answer to the second question, suitably given in terms of how such an expression must function semantically, will provide an answer to the first: a referring expression is, necessarily, one whose function is to refer, so a suitable characterization of what it is to be such an expression is thereby a characterization of what it is to have that function, and so of what that function is. This should settle the question of whether it is the same function or a different one from that which relates other expressions (predicates, logical constants) to the world.

Here are a number of candidates for specifying part or the whole of what it is to be a referring expression. Most of them can be traced back to Russell’s conception of a logically proper name, a name “in the proper strict logical sense of the word” (Russell 1918: 201).

- 1 A referring expression must be semantically simple.
- 2 A referring expression must have just one referent.

¹ In coming to prefer “The Varieties of Reference”, rather than “The Essence of Reference” as his title for an intended lecture course, it may be that Evans was preferring a title which gave the best emphasis, rather than rejecting a title with a presupposition he had come to believe was defective (Evans 1982: vi–vii).

- 3 Understanding a referring expression is a matter of knowing who or what its referent is.
- 4 Referring expressions are scopeless.
- 5 Definite descriptions are not referring expressions.
- 6 Referring expressions are “rigid designators”.

I will describe the motivation for these various claims and will discuss their correctness. I conclude that only the last can be endorsed without qualification, and that even it does not constitute, but merely manifests, the essence of reference.²

1 *Simplicity*

Concern with word–world relations goes back to some of the earliest moments in philosophy (certainly as far back as Aristotle and no doubt further). Where should one look for a notion of reference which sets it aside from other word–world relations? I do not know enough history to venture a confident pronouncement about where we first find such a distinction, but we do find it, in different ways, in both Frege and Russell.³

Frege’s central distinction between concept and object leads to a distinction among expressions. We could think of a referring expression in Fregean terms as what he calls a proper name (*Eigenname*): an expression whose *Sinn* (sense) is supposed to determine an object as opposed to a concept as its *Bedeutung* (referent). In Frege’s writing, the extension of “*Eigenname*” is wider than that of “referring expression” in present day usage, since for Frege whole sentences count as *Eigennamen*, having the special objects called truth values as their referents (all being well). If, as I think best, we represent this divergence as a difference of doctrine rather than as a difference of subject matter, Frege must be taken to deny that a referring expression must be simple. He is fully explicit. Having said that a proper name is a designation having as its referent (*Bedeutung*) a definite object, he continues

The designation of a single object can also consist of several words or other signs. (Frege 1892: 158)

Russell, by contrast, held that reference requires simplicity:

The only kind of word that is theoretically capable of standing for a particular is a *proper name*. (Russell 1918: 200)

A name is a simple symbol (i.e. a symbol which does not have any parts that are symbols)... . (Russell: 1918: 244)

Since particulars are certainly among the things to which we can refer, these two Russellian claims entail that any word theoretically capable of standing for a particular is semantically simple. Even on the reasonable assumption that “standing for” and “referring to” are words for

² A full understanding of reference requires appreciating its basis in pre-linguistic activity, and in particular its link with perceptual attention and tracking (see Campbell 2002). These aspects cannot be addressed in the present essay.

³ Mill (1843) distinguished denotation from connotation, but his denotation would appear to be an undifferentiated word–world relation (adjectives and verbs unproblematically denote), and not a first intimation of the modern notion of reference. Thanks to Dean Buckner for alerting me to the difficulties of identifying the first appearance of the modern notion.

the same relation, this does not quite amount to thesis (1), for two reasons. First, there are expressions which are not “words” (but instead phrases made up of more than one word). We do no injustice to Russell’s thought to replace “kind of word” by “kind of expression” in the first quotation. Secondly, the context makes plain that Russell had in mind only singular reference. It may be that we should understand his claim as that any expression which stands for just one particular must be semantically simple. This interprets the passage as neutral about whether expressions like “Russell and Whitehead” are referring expressions: they are clearly not simple, but if they refer at all, then, on the face of it, they refer to more than one object. On the proposed interpretation of Russell, they are therefore not precluded from counting as referring expressions.

These complex plural names (or expressions which appear to deserve this classification) strongly suggest that one should not accept (1) as it stands. The only alternatives to rejecting (1) are either to claim that the plural expressions are not semantic units at all, for they will “disappear” under “analysis”, or else to regard them as Russellian definite descriptions, and so not referring expressions: definite descriptions along the lines “the set/sum/aggregate whose members/parts are Russell and Whitehead”. While both options have been considered in the literature, both have difficulties which I regard as insurmountable (cf. Hossack 2000, McKay 2003).

If this is right, the only plausible thesis restricts simplicity to singular referring expressions. It is certainly true that many paradigms of singular referring expressions are semantically simple, proper names like “London” and demonstratives like “this”. But complexity lurks close to the simple paradigms. There are apparently complex singular proper names, ones which contain proper names as parts. Most Westerners have names made up of other names: “Tony Blair” seems to be made up of the names “Tony” and “Blair”. Some names of cities (like “Aix-en-Provence”) display a seemingly similar feature. We are generally not fussy about the distinction between the name of a book or movie and its title, and titles are certainly often complex. Demonstrative phrases (like “That book”, or “That book beneath this one”) may contain all sorts of material (including possibly further demonstratives or other referring expressions).⁴ Even our paradigms do not provide much basis for the thesis that all singular referring expressions are simple.

An argument for the simplicity of singular referring expressions could be constructed using Russell’s theory of descriptions as a premise. The theory can be partially characterized as the claim that definite descriptions are not referring expressions. A definite description may have a denotation, and does so just if the predicate in the description is uniquely satisfied in the relevant domain, but for Russell a denotation is not a referent: unlike a referent, Russell believes, a denotation is not required for intelligibility. A complex expression owes its intelligibility to the intelligibility of its parts and their mode of combination. Hence even if a complex expression has a denotation, it cannot have a referent. The argument could be set out as follows:

7 A referring expression owes its intelligibility to having a referent.

⁴ There are views according to which all demonstrative expressions are as such simple, and the predicative material either does not introduce genuine content, or does not really belong with the demonstrative pronoun (for a view of the latter kind, see Lepore and Ludwig (2000)). This involves some departure from natural first thoughts, and it is with these that I am currently concerned.

- 8 A complex expression owes its intelligibility entirely to the meanings of its parts and how they are put together.
- 9 Hence a complex expression does not owe its intelligibility to having a referent.
- 10 So no complex expression is a referring expression.

Although I am not aware of encountering an explicit version of this argument, its availability may well explain the tendency for belief in the simplicity of referring expressions to be linked to the belief that such expressions require a referent.

The conclusion confronts, as possible counterexamples, complex demonstrative expressions, like “That man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo” (cf. Peacocke 1975). Although such cases may be addressed in other ways (see note 4 above), they raise an issue of principle which should make one wary of (8) above. Although semantic complexity by definition requires that the meaning of the complex depend in some way upon the meaning of the parts, entire dependence is another matter. There might be additional dependence upon context, as the example of complex demonstratives suggests. The principle of compositionality which was appealed to may be correct for the “character” of an expression in Kaplan’s sense (1977): that aspect of its meaning which is independent of context, and which serves to determine, in conjunction with the context which prevails on a particular occasion of use, the truth conditions of what is thereby said on that occasion. In this perspective, a complex expression of sound character, determined in the proper way by compositional features, may be used on a given occasion in such a way as to determine no truth conditional content, thanks to recalcitrance of context. Once context enters the picture, and “intelligibility” is understood in a way which factors in the contribution of context to what is said by the use of an expression, (8) becomes wholly implausible, and this argument for the simplicity of singular expressions collapses. The possibility remains open that though the character of a complex expression is a function of the character of its parts, the content is not, since it depends upon context.

2 Uniqueness

Uniqueness demands that, necessarily, a singular referring expression have at most and at least one referent. The “at most” condition has generally been taken for granted, though on the face of it nothing could be more counterintuitive. Many people and places have the same name. Every example of a name which I can think of has more than one bearer. There is Aristotle the philosopher, and Aristotle the tycoon, Paris, France and Paris, Texas; and so on. In this thought, names are individuated in a natural, more or less syntactic, way.⁵ We could alternatively individuate names more semantically, in terms of the practices in which they are used, or in terms of their referents. One could be party to one use of a (syntactic) name without being party to some other use of the same name; yet one might rightly be said fully to understand the name, in the use to which one is party. The situation is similar in the case of demonstratives. Clearly the word “that” has been used of countless different things. This should neither disqualify it as a referring expression, nor defeat a suitable at-most thesis: in each use, “that” has at most one referent.

⁵ Only more or less syntactic, because perhaps the natural criterion counts, for example, “London” and “Londres” as (regional variations on) the same name. Cf Kripke (1972: 8, n9).

The idea that a singular referring expression has at most one referent invokes a more semantic individuation, which makes the claim close to trivial. In normal cases, ones in which there is no confusion or other kind of mistake, the discovery that a singular referring expression is used of more than one thing is simply the discovery that the same (syntactic) expression features in distinct practices. When we speak semantically of a referring expression, we thereby implicitly speak of a practice in which it is used; the relevant notion of a practice requires further clarification (see §3 below).

In the singular case, the at-most condition can be expressed:

if (in a given practice) a singular referring expression refers to x and to y , then $x=y$.

This tells us how we can properly express the condition for plural referring expressions, which in a sense refer to more than one thing. We can use plural variables, that is, variables which may properly be replaced by plural referring expressions, to write the condition much as before:

if (in a given practice) a plural referring expression refers to X and to Y , then X are Y .

If “the Apostles” refers to Mathew, Mark, Luke, ... and John and also to the twelve Apostles, then Mathew, Mark, Luke, ... and John are the twelve Apostles. If we use variables and an identity sign neutral between singular and plural, a single condition can do duty for both singular and plural referring expressions.

The “at-least” condition has been much more contentious. Frege was explicit that, for proper names (Eigennamen), in his broad use of this expression to include definite descriptions and whole sentences, there could be Sinn without Bedeutung:

It may perhaps be granted that every grammatically well-formed expression figuring as a proper name always has a sense. But this is not to say that to the sense there also corresponds a thing meant [Bedeutung]. ... The expression “the least rapidly convergent series” has a sense, but demonstrably there is nothing that it means [i.e. it demonstrably has no Bedeutung]. (Frege 1892: 159)

Almost everyone agrees that intelligible definite descriptions may lack a referent; this has historically been a reason for not counting them among referring expressions. It is much more controversial whether intelligible semantically simple proper names may lack a referent. On the face of it, Frege’s claim of the possibility of Sinn without Bedeutung is not restricted to the semantically complex. This leaves open whether or not he was committed to such a restriction at a deeper level.

Frege is explicit that “Odysseus” has sense but no referent. According to Evans, Frege’s apparent willingness to ascribe sense to certain empty singular terms was equivocal, hedged around with qualifications, and dubiously consistent with the fundamentals of his philosophy of language. (Evans 1982: 38)

For Evans, Frege’s fundamental idea was that the Sinn of a semantically simple expression is the mode of presentation of an object, and so not something available in the absence of an object. Frege’s examples of simple expressions possessing Sinn but lacking Bedeutung belong to fiction, and Evans suggests that this shows that Frege is attempting to retain his fundamental idea: in fiction, we pretend that a name is associated with a mode of presentation of an object. According to Evans, this should have led Frege to say that we merely pretend that the name has Sinn (and so

pretend that it has *Bedeutung*); he should not have said that it really has *Sinn* and really lacks *Bedeutung*.⁶

Whatever Frege's view may have been, there are plenty of philosophers, including Evans himself, who hold that, for most names and demonstratives, no intelligible use could lack a referent. The classic source is Russell:

a name has got to name something or it is not a name (Russell 1918: 243).

For many (though not for Evans himself), this amounts to the thesis that no intelligible referring expression lacks a referent, for referring expressions are often confined to the two categories just mentioned (names and demonstratives).⁷ Let us for the moment confine ourselves to proper names. If it could be shown that these must always have referents, perhaps the considerations would extend to referring expressions more generally.

One argument for the view that proper names must have referents involves a picture of proper names as like tags, or labels. A vivid version is mentioned by Mill (1843: 29): a proper name functions in some respects like the chalk mark the robber placed on the doors of those houses which were to be burgled. Just as there can be no chalk mark on a door without a door, so there cannot be a name without a bearer. Such views need to address the apparent fact that there are familiar names without bearers (like "Santa Claus" and "Vulcan"). Mill in effect denied the phenomenon: "All names are names of something, real or imaginary" (Mill 1843: 32). Those who do not believe that there (really) are any merely imaginary things, like Vulcan or Santa Claus, cannot accept this position, literally understood.⁸ The chalk-mark model is far from realistic, for whereas the chalk-mark cannot become detached from its door, names are often used and introduced in the absence of the bearer. This detachment makes it possible for an expression to present itself as if it were a name with a bearer when it is not, and for a speaker or hearer to have no good basis for telling that it has no bearer. This possibility, which is accepted both by those who hold that names, or referring expressions in general, must have bearers, and by those who deny this, is not mirrored in the chalk-mark view, which, accordingly, cannot be taken as a guide.

A common source of the view that proper names must have referents is that they are not descriptive. Kripke (1972) has persuaded many theorists that, contrary to a view commonly attributed to Frege, and, for "ordinary" proper names, to Russell, the meaning of a proper name is not given by a definite description, nor is a definite description essentially involved in fixing its referent. Taking for granted that definite descriptions can fail to refer to anything, this closes off one way in which a proper name could be intelligible yet have no referent, namely, by

⁶ For disagreement with Evans's interpretation of Frege see Sainsbury 2002: 9–13.

⁷ "The only words one does use as names in the logical sense are words like 'this' and 'that'" (Russell 1918: 201).

⁸ Mill was probably not paying much attention to the distinction between a name of an imaginary object and an expression which, we imagine, names an object. No theorist should have any problem accepting that there are expressions meeting the second condition (though there may be a terminological issue about whether they should count as names). Not every case of a name without a bearer does meet the second condition: Leverrier did not merely imagine that "Vulcan" named an object.

functioning like a definite description. The argument then requires the further claim that there is no other way in which a name could be intelligible while failing to have a referent, a claim for which I am not aware of an argument. On the face of it, a proper name could be intelligible thanks to being used in some systematic and coherent way, without being equivalent to a description yet also without having a referent. The slide from rejecting descriptive views to insisting that a name must have a referent emerges clearly in work by John McDowell.

McDowell (1977) argued, I think entirely persuasively, that the Fregean distinction between sense and reference does not entail that proper names are descriptive, or indeed that their sense is in any way analyzable.⁹ He says that we can distinguish between the claim that “Hesperus” stands for Hesperus and the claim that it stands for Phosphorus, even though Hesperus is Phosphorus, on the grounds that it is the former claim that will lead us to correct interpretations of the use of “Hesperus” in actual language. Although “Hesperus” does stand for Phosphorus, using this in interpreting speech may lead to misinterpretation. It would lead one to misrepresent one who assertively says “Hesperus is visible but Phosphorus is not visible” as making the absurd claim that Phosphorus is visible but Phosphorus is not visible. McDowell’s point seems valuable, both as a defence of a non-descriptive Fregeanism, and for the more general feature that we cannot typically expect, within a single language, to be able to state the meaning of an expression in other terms. To think that we normally could do so would be to think that language has an enormous amount of built-in redundancy in its means of expression. Even if many languages display quite a measure of redundancy, it is certainly not enough to enable the meaning of every expression to be stated in other terms, and there can be no apriori argument against the possibility of a language entirely lacking such redundancy.

In the course of making these valuable points, McDowell introduces a pattern to be used to specify a name’s role in language in the austere way he recommends: we quote the name, append “stands for”, and then append a use of the name without quotation. If we follow this pattern, then on all reasonable views, we commit ourselves to the name having a referent. In defending a non-descriptive account of names, McDowell has defended a position on which every name must have a referent.

McDowell himself should have no grounds for preferring one rather than another of these equally austere ways of representing the crucial fact about the functioning of a name like “Hesperus”:

11 “Hesperus” stands for Hesperus

12 For all x (“Hesperus” stands for x iff $x = \text{Hesperus}$).

The two sentences are equivalent in the classical logic which McDowell implicitly accepts; and (12) is as good as (11) from the point of view of providing correct accounts of the speech of users of a language containing “Hesperus”. McDowell himself should therefore have no quarrel with a presentation of his view through a sentence like (12) rather than (11).

⁹ This accords well with Frege’s own observation: “In order to speak of the sense of an expression ‘A’ one may simply use the phrase ‘the sense of the expression ‘A’” (1892: 159). This suggests that Frege is disinclined to suppose that, in general, the sense of an expression can be specified in other terms.

From other points of view, however, (12) is to be preferred to (11), for it can be true even when the target expression is a name with no bearer. On all reasonable views, “‘Vulcan’ stands for Vulcan” is not true. It entails the falsehood that something is Vulcan. By contrast, within so-called negative free logic (NFL), “For all x (“Vulcan” stands for x iff $x = \text{Vulcan}$)” is true: “ $x = \text{Vulcan}$ ” is false of each thing, since any subject-predicate sentence with an empty referring expression is false, and so is “‘Vulcan’ stands for x ”. Within negative free logic, existential quantifier introduction is restricted, so that there is no inference from the truth of the quantified sentence (12) to the falsehood that Vulcan exists.¹⁰

If we reconstrue McDowell’s article as an argument for the impossibility of names without bearers, it would need as a premise that classical logic, and in particular the notion of an individual constant which it incorporates, permits a correct expression of the function of proper names regarded as primitive terms (rather than as disguised definite descriptions). With this premise, nothing else is needed to arrive at the conclusion that every name must have a bearer, as is shown by the classical theoremhood of every sentence of the form “ $\exists x x = a$ ”. This hardly advances the issue, for, in the context, the only contested feature of classical logic is whether it is correct to model natural language proper names as expressions which, on every interpretation, are assigned a bearer. McDowell did not, I believe, intend his article as an argument for the conclusion that there cannot be empty names. Rather, this thesis struck him as a “complication” (McDowell 1977: 172); we can properly see it as an artefact of the classical logical framework which he takes for granted.

Notions of pretence can be used to help render more plausible the view that every proper name must have a bearer. For example, in fiction, in pretending that certain events occurred, involving certain individuals, we pretend that certain expressions are proper names, that is, are expressions with referents (cf Evans 1982: ch. 10). A defence of this kind is required only if one is independently persuaded that every name must have a bearer. The reasons for this opinion considered so far have not been persuasive; a further possible reason, which I claim is also unpersuasive, will be considered in §3.

The more general thesis that any referring expression must have a referent might be reached by reflection on the role of reference in truth conditions. One line of thought involves the following steps:

- 13 Reference is a relation which is characterized by its role in truth conditions.
- 14 For properly constructed simple sentences in which a referring expression t is coupled with a predicate, F , the truth conditions are:
“ t is F ” is true iff “ t ” has just one referent and it satisfies “ F ” and is false iff “ t ” has just one referent and it does not satisfy “ F ”.
- 15 If a properly constructed sentence is neither true nor false, it has a part which is not intelligible.

¹⁰ The application of negative free logic to semantics dates back to Burge (1974). See also Sainsbury (2002: XII). For an overview of free logics see Morscher and Simons (2001). By negative free logic I mean their NFL with a partial interpretation function and a total valuation function (see their p. 11).

- 16 The only way for a properly constructed simple sentence “*t* is *F*” to be neither true nor false is for “*t*” to fail to have a unique referent.¹¹
- 17 Hence an expression which plays such a role in the construction of simple sentences but which lacks a referent is not intelligible.
- 18 Referring expressions can play such a role in the construction of simple sentences.
- 19 So all intelligible referring expressions have a unique referent.

The truth conditions envisaged at (14), which may be called Strawsonian, have an obvious alternative: keep to the necessary and sufficient condition for truth, but regard falsehood as failure of truth. Such an account, which may be called Ockhamist, prevents the argument from going through: a simple sentence whose referring expression has no referent will be false.¹² So the argument needs to be supplemented with a case for Strawsonian truth conditions.

Strawson himself (1950) attacks something like this argument, which he ascribes to Russell. He insists, rightly in my view, on the importance of the distinction between a sentence and any statement which a sentence may be used to make on some specific occasion of its use. Being meaningful or intelligible is a property of sentences and other expressions and is common to various distinct uses to which they may be put. Something of this kind is required to do justice to indexicality. The same sentence (for example, “I am happy”) can be used to make different statements, according to who uses the sentence and when. In this framework, (15) above will be rejected as some kind of category mistake. There is no inference from the fact that, in a specific use, no statement is made by a sentence, to the conclusion that the sentence or any part of it is meaningless. As Strawson says, the meaningfulness of the sentence “The present King of France is bald” is manifest by the fact that in the eighteenth century it could have been used to make a statement, even though it cannot now be used with this upshot.

Strawson’s early work gave a new direction to the study of reference by stressing that it is a social phenomenon, essentially dependent upon speakers’ intentions, which themselves implicitly presuppose “identifying knowledge” of particulars on the part of fellow members of the linguistic community. Following this line of thought, he summarized the “function” of proper names and various other singular terms, at least in their “primary” use: they are to introduce particular objects into discourse, enabling us to judge propositions concerning these objects (Strawson 1974). Many theorists would accept this characterization. On one common use of the notion of a function, something can possess a function which it does not, or even cannot, perform. The function of a malformed heart is to pump blood, even if such a heart cannot in fact pump blood. So there could be names, or in general referring expressions, having as their function to enable us to introduce particular objects into discourse, yet incapable of fulfilling this function. The analogy suggests that they may still be classified as referring expressions. But talk of function leaves us in the dark about whether we should say that a non-referring referring expression can be understood, or whether it can be used in the expression of a proposition. Strawson said that although such expressions can be understood, they cannot be used in the expression of a proposition: “there is no true or false proposition asserted” (1974: 58). An

¹¹ If “*F*” is not intelligible, nothing will satisfy it, so the intelligibility of “*F*” is not required in the argument. This rather artificial feature could be dispensed with.

¹² Cf. Strawson 1974: 58; 1961: 401; Ockham (Freddoso 1998: 86).

argument for this position requires more than the premise that referring expressions have as their function to refer.

I have identified the following arguments for the view that names must have a referent:

- 20 McDowell's argument from the correct austere semantic description of names.
- 21 The argument from Strawsonian truth conditions.
- 22 The argument from the function of names.

(20) rests on an unargued assumption of the adequacy of classical logical semantic categories for the description of natural language (an assumption which delivers the conclusion without need for the appeal to austerity). (21) rests on the assumption that these truth conditions are correct, as opposed to Ockhamist ones. (22) delivers the conclusion only on the assumption that everything which has a certain function fulfils it. The needed further assumptions are either false (as for (22)) or else controversial.¹³

Without the premise that names must have a referent, one could not hope to generalize to all referring expressions. But one might look elsewhere for arguments, in particular one might look to the notion of understanding. Here one must take proper note of the epistemic and social notions which, as Strawson suggested, are critical to name-using practices.

3 Identifying knowledge, understanding and transmission

The thesis that every referring expression has a unique referent is associated with the thesis that understanding a referring expression involves knowing to whom or what it refers. Proper names are, as usual, the paradigms. In a theory like Strawson's, which involves more than one semantic layer, *meaning* (a property of sentences) and *statement* (what emerges from the interaction of meaning with contextual features prevailing on a particular occasion on which the sentence is put to use), there is a prospect of extending the claim beyond the semantically simple. Understanding a *sentence* containing the expression "the present King of France" does not involve knowing who the King is; intuitively, there is no such fact. By contrast, it is not implausible to hold that understanding a *statement* made using a sentence which contains that expression does involve knowing who the King is. In a circumstance in which there is no knowing who, no statement is made by the use of that sentence. One such circumstance is there being no King.

Strawson claimed that linguistic reference is typically possible only in a social context in which it is mutually known that the members of one's speech community have or can immediately acquire independent knowledge of the particulars to which one wishes to refer. The use of a definite referring expression, or definite singular term,

achieves its identificatory purpose by drawing upon what in the widest sense might be called the conditions of its utterance, *including* what the hearer is presumed to know or to presume already or to be in a position there and then to perceive for himself. ... The possibility of identification in the relevant sense exists only for an audience antecedently equipped with

¹³ "Any existence claim that is felt to inhere in the meaning of singular terms is well eliminated." (Quine 1960: 182) My thesis is that there is in any case no such existence claim, so nothing needing elimination.

knowledge or presumptions, or placed in a position of possible perception, which can be drawn on in this way. (Strawson 1961: 399)

In using a sentence containing a demonstrative in an ordinary perceptual situation, for example using “That bull is about to charge” in the conspicuous presence of a large bovine, the speaker assumes that the hearer either had already seen the animal or could now come to see it. Unless the speaker presumes upon the hearer’s access to this perceptual mode of identification, the utterance would not be a normal and appropriate use of the sentence.

Although Strawson’s considerations are sometimes used to justify the view that understanding a referring expression involves identifying its referent, the ones just quoted do not involve so strong a claim. The uncontroversial claim, and the only one to which Strawson is committed in the passage quoted, is that (in normal circumstances) one who uses a referring expression must *presume* that her hearer knows or presumes this or that, or can identify an object as the intended referent. If these speaker-presumptions are presumptions only, and not knowledge, they may be false, and one way for them to be false is for the referring expression to lack a referent. Completing the argument requires two additions: that an understander should know the things the speaker presumes he knows; and that this requirement on understanding should reflect a feature of meaning: if understanding is impossible (for example because there is no “identifying fact” to be known), there is no meaning.

The link between meaning and understanding comes to the fore in the work of Gareth Evans (1982), who, developing some of Strawson’s ideas, provides an account of the varieties of reference in terms of varieties of conditions required for understanding. Evans suggests that understanding is a form of knowledge. To understand a saying (an utterance with declarative force) is to know what the utterer has thereby said. On the assumption that the meaning of a sentence is derived from the meanings of its component words and their mode of combination, it is natural to think that the relevant knowledge of what has been said by an utterance is derived from knowledge relating to the meanings of the parts. In the case of proper names, simple referring expressions, a Strawsonian thought is that the relevant knowledge is “identifying knowledge”, registering which object the expression refers to. The relevant knowledge might be identified in various, non-exclusive, ways. (a) It might be that one who understands a name, N, is able knowledgeably to answer the question “To whom or what does ‘N’ refer?”. (b) It might be that an understander must be capable of answering this question without making use of the name in question (a non-linguistic answer, for example a pointing gesture, might be a limiting case). (c) It might be that the relevant knowledge can be expressed only in a *de re* way: concerning the object which is the referent of “N”, the understander knows that it is the referent of “N”.

On Strawson’s own view, it would seem that knowledge of all the kinds (a)-(c) must obtain. If the understander brings to bear independent identificatory knowledge, then an answer to the question “To whom or what does ‘N’ refer” could be expressed independently of using the name. (One would not expect there to be a piece of identificatory knowledge available to every understander: the requirement is only that every understander possess some identificatory knowledge, and this may differ from understander to understander and occasion to occasion.) There would seem no barrier to expressing the knowledge thus made manifest in the *de re* style envisaged in (c).

These are plausible views, but they must be distinguished from closely similar weaker ones. As they stand, the views imply the impossibility of a referring expression which lacks a bearer. There is no knowing to whom or what a name refers unless it has a referent. Compare this claim: An understander must be able to give a knowledgeable answer to the question “To whom or what does ‘N’ purport to refer?” without using “N”. This stays clear of *de re* attribution, but captures something very close to the Strawsonian answer. There is a requirement of independent knowledge of an independent fact of purported identification. “Santa Claus” purports to refer to Santa Claus. One who understands the name knows this, and also knows that, for example, “Santa Claus” purports to refer to a jolly bearded Lapp who brings children presents at Christmas. This seems to do justice to many of the things that struck Strawson about our use of referring expressions. What motivation is there for moving to stronger versions of the claim, versions which make it impossible for empty referring expressions to be understood? Answers independent of how we account for understanding have been considered and not found compelling. The same should be said for accounts which draw upon the nature of understanding.¹⁴

In considering what items of knowledge could be involved in, or identified with, understanding, we need to re-work a theme of the previous section, the one involved in the discussion of McDowell. In the truth theoretic tradition initiated by Davidson, a semantic account of a language would involve truth theoretic axioms which would deliver T-sentences, theorems of the form “*s* is true iff *p*”, in which “*p*” states something which could properly be used to report what was said in a normal statement-making use of *s*. By delivering such T-sentences, the axioms are to meet the condition that if they were known, they would provide enough information to make understanding possible. In McDowell’s framework considered in §2 above, it looked as if suitable truth theoretic axioms for names would follow the lines of “‘Hesperus’ stands for Hesperus”, and so knowledge of them would be possible only for non-empty names. However, we saw that a theorist who believes that empty names deserve a non-descriptive semantic account can take over the non-descriptive approach while denying the need for a referent. If understanding is to be identified with an actual or possible item of propositional knowledge, then, in a negative free logical framework, one can include such knowledge for empty names: for all *x*, “Vulcan” refers to *x* iff *x* is Vulcan. This contributes to meeting, even for empty names, a condition which Evans thought important: “there is some true proposition such that knowledge of its truth constitutes understanding the utterance” (Evans 1982: 330). Admittedly, the condition is met in a rather abstract way: we get little philosophical enlightenment about what the relevant understanding consists in. For this we must look to another idea which Evans stressed: that of a name-using practice. This idea can also help address another issue: the relevant knowledge is not the timeless thing philosophers sometimes pretend. We need a context if a T-sentence is to have any determinate content, for example, one which will distinguish the practice of using “Vulcan” in the way we have presupposed, involving an astronomical context, and the practice of using it in the context of the ancient pantheon. We perhaps suppose that thinking requires no context, that somehow the relevant distinctions can be made in thought by willing them so; this is probably an illusion (cf. Burge 1983: 83). Distinct name-using practices may be practices of using the same name (syntactically considered); in the example, one practice is supposed to

¹⁴ A more detailed discussion of Evans’s view is provided by Sainsbury 2002: IX.

relate to Vulcan, the lame god who worked in bronze, and another to Vulcan, the planet Leverrier claimed to have discovered.

If the notion of a name-using practice must be made secure in any adequate theoretical reflection on names, describing name-understanding in terms of propositional knowledge may not be maximally illuminating. Understanding certainly issues in propositional knowledge, knowledge of what speakers have said, but this does not guarantee either that understanders in fact derive it from propositional knowledge, or that talk of propositional knowledge throws the greatest light on understanding. An alternative view is that to understand a certain use of a name is simply to be party to the practice to which that use belongs. While this participation might involve propositional knowledge, there seems in general no reason to suppose that this is necessary. We can be party to the practice of bowing our heads on being introduced to someone for the first time, without so much as knowing that we behave in this way, let alone there being a proposition we know which summarizes the fact of our participation.

Kripke (1972) takes a stand on what determines the referent of a name which mirrors this approach to understanding. In Kripke's picture, a practice propagates outward from an initial baptism of an object. This causal propagation fixes the referent of the use of a name as the recipient of the baptism from which the use derives. On this picture of name-using practices, it may seem that the referent is again essential, and that no progress has been made towards recognizing the intelligibility of names without bearers.

Kripke's picture, however, has an apparently unmotivated feature. A baptism which, perhaps through some radical mistake, is the baptism of nothing, is as good a propagator of a new use as a baptism of an object. The baptism masks off the object's causal role. No doubt if a baptism succeeds in giving a name to an object, that object will be causally involved in the baptism. It does not follow that the object plays any significant role in determining the subsequent causal chain. Subsequent uses will be those which trace back in the right way to the baptism. If they do this, then they trace back to the baptised object; but that extra fact does not make a contribution to the unification of the practice. Hence there is no reason to think that a referent will play some specially significant part in the individuation of name-using practices: all the work can be done by baptisms, even in the absence of an object.¹⁵

Once we have to hand a notion of name-using practice individuated independently of the name's referent, we can use it to explain understanding a name in terms of immersion in that practice. This idea helps explain why we are, in ordinary life, so liberal in allowing new members into the practice. If someone who has not heard a certain name before is exposed to a few minutes of conversation in which the name is used, we normally do not balk at saying that the newcomer has come to understand the name. As with many other linguistic practices, our use of proper names, like other expressions, is marked by the slogan "newcomers welcome!".

Often, immersion in a practice will result in various kinds of knowledge, which may manifest that immersion. For example, we will normally learn something about the name's bearer. Such

¹⁵ See Sainsbury 2002: XII. Evans (1982: 381) also holds that practices are not to be individuated by their referents.

manifestations cannot be guaranteed: information may be scrambled, or indeed the name might be empty. Resistance to the view that understanding might be simply constituted by immersion, and might leave no trace in introspectible propositional knowledge, may stem from a general predilection for theories of the mind according to which one's mental life is in principle open to one's mental gaze. By contrast, if one is immersed in a practice, one individuated in terms of its baptism, aspects of the immersion may not be open to such gaze. In the present anti-Cartesian climate, the natural choice in such a conflict is simply to accept that immersion is not an introspectible property. It may also suggest counterexamples to KK. Understanding is knowledge, yet we may reasonably have knowledge-defeating doubts about whether we understand even though we in fact do.¹⁶

4 Scope

An alleged mark of a genuinely referential expression is that it is scopeless:

- 23 if sentences which agree in everything, except the relative scope of two expressions, differ in meaning or truth conditions, neither expression is a referring expression.¹⁷

I will suggest that although referring expressions manifest no significant scope distinctions with respect to temporal or modal operators, they at least could manifest such distinctions with respect to other operators, in particular negation. Although this is possible, I also think that the English “not” hardly ever exploits this possibility.¹⁸

A classic application of scope considerations to conclusions about reference derives from Russell's first presentation of his theory of descriptions (Russell 1905). One could distil the argument as follows:

- 24 Definite descriptions show significant scope variation with respect to negation.
25 No referring expressions show significant scope variation.
26 So definite descriptions are not referring expressions.

Russell's famous example was

- 27 The King of France is not bald,

which he said was ambiguous between a reading on which the negation has wide scope relative to the definite description, so that the whole sentence is true, and a reading on which it has narrow scope, so that the whole sentence is false. One might contrast (27) with

- 28 Aristotle is not bald,

¹⁶ This is relevant to “Paderewski” cases: see Kripke 1979.

¹⁷ See Geach 1972: 144. Geach explicitly considers only temporal and modal scopelessness. According to the present paper, referring expressions are temporally and modally rigid. This is consistent with their having significant scope interactions with, for example, negation. Kripke (1972) contrasts names and definite descriptions in relation to scope distinctions in modal contexts. In later work (Kripke 1977: n.7), he is careful to avoid commitment to a general thesis of scopelessness.

¹⁸ Ockham seems to have thought that uses of the Latin “non” exploit the possibility: “ista est neganda: ‘Chimaera est non-homo’, quia habet unum exponentem falsam, scilicet istam: ‘Chimaera est aliquid’” (quoted by Henry 1984: 102). Klima (2001: 201) claims that this distinction is common in medieval philosophy.

which shows no such ambiguity.

There is no doubt that the two standard formalizations of (27) are scope variants (that is, they differ only in that one or more pairs of expressions differ in relative scope). It is a more controversial claim that the sentence is ambiguous in English. It seems to me that if we firmly discard our Russellian ear trumpets, we cannot hear (27) as false in normal contexts. There is no need to become embroiled in a dispute about intuitions of this kind; instead we can go directly to the theoretical issue, which can be expressed as follows. On a Russellian view, a description sentence, “The *F* is *G*”, is true iff “the *F*” has a denotation (that is, a unique satisfier of “*F*”) which satisfies “*G*” and is otherwise false. Falsity can arise in two ways: through “the *F*” failing to have a denotation, or through it having a denotation which fails to satisfy “*G*”. It is irrelevant whether these distinct possibilities can or cannot be expressed, ambiguously or unambiguously, by English signs for negation.

By contrast, on a Strawsonian view, a sentence in which a name, “*a*”, takes the place of the description is true iff “*a*” has a referent which satisfies “*G*” and is false iff “*a*” has a referent which does not satisfy “*G*”. These conditions do not speak to the case in which “*a*” has no referent. There is nothing to correspond to the two ways in which, on the Russellian view, a sentence can be false. The generalization is this: referring expressions induce truth conditions for simple sentences following the Strawsonian pattern; impostors, expressions which may seem like referring expressions but which are really nothing of the sort, induce truth conditions for simple sentences following the Russellian pattern. What was initially presented as an issue about the scope of negation is really best seen as one concerning the pattern of truth conditions.

There is a simple *prima facie* reason to prefer applying the Russellian pattern to the case of sentences containing names. The Russellian pattern produces Ockhamist truth conditions: “*a* is *F*” is true iff “*a*” has a referent which satisfies “*F*” and is false otherwise. There are negative existential truths expressed using names, like “Vulcan does not exist”. Applying the Ockhamist pattern, “Vulcan exists” is false, since “*a*” has no referent and the condition for truth fails; since negation turns a falsehood into a truth, “Vulcan does not exist” is true. The Strawsonian pattern would ensure that “Vulcan exists” has no truth condition. Special devices and theses may be applied to deal with this problem, but the Ockhamist perspective renders redundant such ad hoc moves.

Names contribute to the truth conditions of simple sentences rather as definite descriptions do: no referent, no truth. Assuming names count as referring expressions, this shows that present considerations do not establish that referring expressions and definite descriptions belong to exclusive categories. Those who believe that the semantics of proper names are given by definite descriptions believed this already. However, a similar argument can be run even for demonstratives, and so should persuade everyone who believes that there are *any* referring expressions. “This does not exist” is false, but it might have been true (assuming “this” to refer to a contingent being), that is, there is a world with respect to which it is true, that is, a world with respect to which “This exists” is false. World-relativized Ockhamist or free logical truth conditions deal with this in a smooth and obvious way, treating “This exists” as false with respect to such a world through lack of a referent; alternatives are complex and involve a loss of uniformity.

The Ockhamist approach can be applied to natural language negation by considering an apparent difficulty: why cannot we use

29 Pegasus doesn't fly

to disabuse someone who has been deceived by the myth? Being parallel to "Vulcan does not exist", this ought to be true. Given the nature of the truth conditions, a free logician could say that natural language negation generates scope ambiguities, so that there is a false reading of (29). This would be to move from the possibility of scope distinctions with respect to negation, which I accept, to the further claim that these distinctions are needed in order to describe the behaviour of "not" in English. Though there are special cases in which we do need to recognize ambiguity, (29) is not one of them. The norm is that negation takes wide scope¹⁹, and (29) is indeed true. Were ambiguity universal, there would be a false reading of "Vulcan does not exist", which there does not appear to be. We can explain the phenomena better by appealing to two connected features. First, it is possible to overlook the distinction between truth and falsehood on the one hand and, on the other, fidelity or lack of fidelity to a myth or fiction. (29) is true, but is not faithful to the myth. Second, we need to bear in mind the defeasible presumption that referring expressions refer. One deceived by the myth would take it that "Pegasus" in (29) refers, and is believed by the speaker to refer, so an appropriate response would be: "What are the wings for? Just ornament?". A powerful move is needed to cancel the presumption, for example saying "Pegasus does not exist". The presumption can hold fictionally as well as genuinely. If we are both engaged in the myth, we are concerned with fidelity and not truth: we hold the presumption in the fictional or mythical way, and it is still right for you to dispute (29): you dispute its fidelity, not its truth. We cannot use (29) to disabuse, for either it will be taken as merely fictional, and so to be evaluated for fidelity rather than truth, or else, taken factually, it will not by itself be enough to cancel the presumption that referring expressions have referents.

A similar argument to the one about the scope of negation could be advanced using the possibility operator rather than negation, and the following contrasting pair:

30 The teacher of Alexander might not have taught Alexander.

31 Aristotle might not have taught Alexander.

It has been claimed that (30), unlike (31), is scope ambiguous. In the presence of the lemma about the scopelessness of referring expressions, this excludes definite descriptions from the category of referring expressions, while leaving open the possibility that proper names belong to it.

I claim that (30) is unambiguously true, and that the same goes for attempts to give the possibility operator wide scope in English, for example:

32 It might have been that the teacher of Alexander did not teach Alexander.

On the other hand, there are examples which point in a different direction:

33 George Bush might not have been the President of the USA

has only a true reading in normal use: it cannot say that he might not have been himself. This combination of views requires a pluralistic treatment of definite descriptions: in some uses, as in (32), they are rigid, in others, as in (33), they are not. The thesis that referring expressions are

¹⁹ It is hard to hear "George Bush didn't meet with the King of France" as false, though the Russellian must claim that there is a false reading.

scopeless, when scope with respect to modal operators is the only issue, coincides with the thesis that referring expressions are rigid. I accept this thesis, and amplify it and argue for it in §6 below.

5 *Definite descriptions*

Even if there is no general argument for the semantic simplicity of all referring expressions, it does not follow that every complex expression which is naturally regarded as a referring expression really is one. The most heavily debated category is that of definite descriptions, singular or plural expressions of the form “the so-and-so”. Going back to Russell, there have been many specific arguments for the view that these are quantifier phrases rather than referring expressions (for the most thorough and detailed versions of these Russellian arguments, see Neale 1990). At the same time, there has been plenty of rather unselfconscious talk of the reference of definite descriptions. For example Quine, who officially subscribes to Russell’s theory of descriptions, says “In ‘I saw the lion’ the singular term is presumed to refer to some one lion” (Quine 1960: 112), and that “in ordinary discourse the idiom of singular description” is used to “single out” an object (1960: 183). Strawson (1950) explicitly argues for treating definite descriptions as referring expressions. Kripke is officially a defender of Russell’s theory of descriptions (Kripke 1977), yet he is happy to talk of the referent of a definite description (Kripke 1972: 24) and to treat names and descriptions as variants within the common semantic category of “designators”.

There is little pre-theoretical pressure to make much of the distinction between proper names and definite descriptions; we owe to Russell the motivation for splitting up this apparently unified category. From his point of view, definite descriptions could not be referring expressions, that is, could not function in the way that logically proper names function. His many reasons include these:

- 34 some definite descriptions have no referent, and these cannot be regarded as referring expressions; by “parity of form”, the same holds for all.
- 35 some can be used in negative existential truths, and these cannot be regarded as referring expressions; by “parity of form”, the same holds for all.
- 36 some can be used in informative (non-“tautologous”) identity sentences, and these cannot be regarded as referring expressions; by “parity of form”, the same holds for all.

Dualistic accounts of definite descriptions, typically expressed in terms of a distinction between “referential” and “attributive”, suggest that all the “by parity of form” arguments are suspect. Turning to more specific issues, few would accept the validity of the last two reasons. Anyone who thinks that one can refer to contingent things, for example by some expression *e*, will believe that such a thing might not exist (or might not have existed). The most natural way to think about the semantics requires there to be a world with respect to which the sentence “*e* does not exist” is true. This is hard to square with (35). Frege took the fact that, to all appearances, there are informative identity sentences involving referring expressions as a datum in constructing the distinction between sense and reference; common sense is on his side. One would accordingly need theoretical justification for (36).

Though many would accept the validity of (34), it is not justified within a free logical perspective: a referring expression may lack a referent.²⁰ Russell also gave a significant reason for not regarding all definite descriptions as referring expressions: many are used quite correctly and normally, yet without a hint of a referential intention. Slightly elaborating an example used by Russell (1912: ch. 5), imagine someone drawing up the rules of a club, and writing: “The secretary shall be elected by simple majority vote of the members”. There is no person-related “identifying information” that the utterer is bringing to bear or trying to invoke; nor is she intending her hearer to bring to bear some identifying information or other.²¹ Another example of the absence of such intentions is a supposed proof by *reductio ad absurdum* that there is no greatest prime. A mathematician who starts the proof with “The greatest prime is odd or even” clearly has no referential intentions. The conclusion is that the only serious way to do justice to the supposedly referential nature of some descriptions is pluralistic: there are at least two kinds or uses of definite descriptions, and one is referential.

Such a pluralistic scheme naturally starts with a dualism of speakers intentions. Donnellan marks it thus:

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. (Donnellan 1966: 285)

Donnellan provides both attributive and referential uses with positive characterizations. I will focus on the referential use, and speak of other uses simply as non-referential.

There are at least two kinds of referential intentions. One kind is object-involving, meeting a condition of the following form: there is an object, x such that the speaker intends that ... x The other kind is not object-involving, meeting a condition of the following weaker form: the speaker intends that there be an object x such that ... x ²² It will be controversial to say what should fill the blanks. I think that the speaker should intend the truth or otherwise of what he says to turn on how things are with x . When the intentions are object-involving, the quantifier which governs this occurrence of “ x ” can be placed with widest scope, lying outside the content of the intention; in the non-object-involving case, the quantifier must be placed within the content of the intention. If there are empty referring expressions, we cannot require that the proper use of every referring expression should be animated by object-involving referential intentions. The relevant question is therefore whether it is plausible to think that normal uses of definite descriptions need to be animated by non-object-involving referential intentions. These do not preclude object-involving referential intentions; indeed, object-involving referential

²⁰ “Nowhere has free logic had greater impact than in the logical theory of definite descriptions” (Lambert 2001: 37).

²¹ It may be that these office-related descriptions form a separate category: they are referential, but refer to an office rather than to an office holder. This may be involved in the best way of handling the ambiguity of sentences like “The mayor comes up for election every year”.

²² Those who hear this as an intention to bring something into existence, and thus as inappropriate, may prefer to regard it as an abbreviation for: the speaker believes that there is an object x such that ... and intends that ... x

intentions normally guarantee the existence of non-object-involving ones, so if examples of these can be found, they will serve the purpose.

A large range of expressions can be used with referential intentions, including quantifier phrases (as in “*Someone* has once again failed to close the door properly”) and indefinite noun phrases. To count an expression as a referring expression, the practice of using the expression must contain a significant and typical period in which normal use of the expression requires having referential intentions and the expression is a perfectly adapted semantic tool for realizing them, with no irony or archness.

Some uses of definite descriptions fit this bill. Here is an example in which the referential intention is non-object-involving. You have a tennis court and you invite me over to play. We walk to the court together and I see that there is no centre net. I ask “Where’s the net?”. I have non-object-involving referential intentions: I intend that there be an object, namely the net, concerning which you realize that I am asking where it is. For my plan to work, you have to draw upon object-related knowledge: the net needs to be something of which you are aware. (I am hoping that you know, concerning the net, where it is; that is, that you know where the net is.) This is knowledge I must presume you to have in order for my question to be appropriate. By normal standards, I do not have object-involving intentions: I have never played on your court before, and have never had any causal contact, direct or indirect, with the net in question: it is not something I have seen or touched, or seen photographs of, and nor have I been party to any discussion in which it was referred to. It is consistent with my having the described intentions that there is no net and never has been one (the construction company went bankrupt before completing the job).

Cases in which there are non-object-involving referential intentions can be distinguished from cases in which there are no referential intentions at all. These are cases in which the speaker has no object-related knowledge, and does not count on the hearer having any. A clear example has already been given: the mathematician who non-assertively utters “The greatest prime is odd or even” in the course of his *reductio*. Other cases are descriptions used predicatively, for example “De Gaulle is the President of the Republic” (cf Linsky 1963: 80): a use of the definite description in such a sentence may not be animated by referential intentions. Other commonly cited examples are less clear. For example, Strawson quite reasonably suggests that uses of “the whale” are importantly different in “The whale is a mammal” and “The whale struck the ship”. Normally, no one using the first would intend to refer to a particular whale; users would have neither object-involving nor non-object-involving whale-related referential intentions. In the case of the second, however, a normal context would contain a whale which was the object of the speaker’s referential intentions. This does not settle whether or not the first sentence, as most naturally used, contains a referring expression. Perhaps “the whale” can also refer to a species, and perhaps a normal use of the first sentence involves referential intentions directed at that species.²³

²³ Matters are more complicated than one might expect from the philosophical literature. For example, nouns apparently referring to species cannot always be happily prefixed by “the”, as in: “Some Americans came to Africa to hunt lion”, “Neanderthal man was probably exterminated by *homo sapiens*”. See also Graff (2001).

Donnellan's own initial (and best-known) example of a non-referential use is introduced as follows:

Suppose ... we come upon poor Smith foully murdered. From the brutal manner of the killing and the fact that Smith was the most gentle person in the world, we might exclaim, "Smith's murderer is insane". (Donnellan 1966: 285)

We are to assume that "Smith's murderer" abbreviates the definite description "the murderer of Smith".²⁴ Donnellan envisages that the evidence for the assertion is purely general (anyone who committed such a murder is insane). It may follow that the utterance in question was not driven by object-involving referential intentions. It does not follow that it was not driven by the weaker kind of referential intentions. That depends upon whether the speaker intended that, for some object *x* the truth of the remark should turn on how things are with *x*. Presumably that would be the normal intention, which is a (non-object-involving) referential intention in my scheme. This suggests that fidelity to Donnellan requires "referential" descriptions to be confined to those used with object-involving referential intentions. Further evidence is provided by his characterization of attributive uses, already cited:

A speaker who uses a definite description attributively in an assertion states something about whoever or whatever is the so-and-so.

This is certainly consistent with, and even suggestive of, the use of a definite description with a non-object-involving referential intention. I have suggested that we cut semantic reality more closely to its joints if we take non-object-involving referential intentions as the principal guide, on the side of use, to what expressions are to be counted as referring expressions.

The distinction between object-involving and non-object-involving referential intentions is "external" to the speaker: duplicates may differ in just this respect, one being in the presence of an object fit to be the target of object-involving intentions, the other not (perhaps thanks to Cartesian interference). In contrast, we would typically wish a constraint of the envisaged kind, one which determines what interpretive response is required by the hearer, to be within the control of the speaker. The speaker can control whether he intends the hearer's interpretation to be object-involving, and he can possess this intention even if he is animated merely by non-object-involving referential intentions. The speaker cannot control whether he succeeds in getting the hearer to attain an object-involving interpretation: that is a function of what is in their environment. This suggests that the significant break is between uses animated by referential intentions of either kind, and uses not so animated.

Donnellan (1966) argued that we could recognize a referential use of a definite description "the *F*" by the fact that the speaker could thereby refer to something which is not *F*. If one takes this line, one will be tempted to count an utterance of "The man drinking martini is drunk" as true if Jones is drunk and is the object of the speaker's referential intentions, even if Jones has nothing but water in his martini glass. This ruling is not compulsory. In such a case, assuming the circumstances to be of the most ordinary kind, the speaker intended to refer to a martini-drinker

²⁴ It is unclear that genitives can properly be treated in this way; not, at least, if uniqueness is required. "John is Sally's child" can be true even if Sally has other children (cf. Graff (2001)). The same effect can obtain even when the definite description is in subject as opposed to predicate position: "John's leg was broken in his fall" can be true even if John has two legs.

but failed. We are not compelled to say that this failure really amounts to success in referring to a non-martini-drinker.

Many theorists (e.g. Kripke 1997, Neale 1990) have attempted to show that the direction Donnellan himself took at this point is misguided. Suppose (as before) that Jones is the object of the speaker's intentions and that there is also a unique martini drinker, Smith. One could not fault a hearer who took the utterance to be true just if Smith is drunk. If this is a faultless interpretation, it must have correctly identified what the speaker said. A hearer is not obliged, in order to reach a proper understanding, to chase through the various possible errors of which a speaker might be guilty. If this is accepted, Donnellan should not have allowed (and arguably did not allow) that the utterance would be true if Jones was drunk. Such criticisms should not, however, be regarded as counting against dualism (or pluralism) about definite descriptions, since dualism does not require the particular development which Donnellan envisaged.

Few doubt that there are referential uses of definite descriptions. The controversy is the impact of this fact on semantics. I believe that referential intentions show that referential semantics are appropriate: these will involve a reference condition of a familiar form, in the setting of a theory which will ensure that referring expressions are rigid (see §6 below).²⁵ The most straightforward way in which this effect can be achieved is by regarding "the" as ambiguous, and reserving a special axiom for the kind of "the" which enters into a phrase used with referential intentions. An alternative is to regard "the" as itself semantically underdetermined, while holding that contextual enrichment may lead either to referential truth conditions or some other. On this view we could think of "the" as having a constant meaning in rather the way a demonstrative pronoun like "that" or "I" does, and part of this constant meaning is a switch which says "If you detect referential intentions (or other relevant contextual material), interpret me as a referential definite description; if not, interpret me as a non-referential definite description".²⁶ In this essay, I take no stand on which alternative is to be preferred.

6 R Rigidity

In a Kripkean perspective, rigidity is understood in such a way that an expression may have as referent at a world an object which does not exist at that world.²⁷ This is made explicit in these words:

²⁵ If the metalanguage has referring definite descriptions, the pattern will be: for all x , "the F " refers to x iff $x =$ the F ; if not, the pattern could be Russellian: for all x , "the F " refers to x iff x is uniquely F . Even the Russellian condition may assign a referent rigidly, if other parts of the theory treat reference as a rigid relation.

²⁶ Evans (1982: 321–2) assumes that any account of definite descriptions which is dualist at the level of truth conditions will treat "the" as ambiguous. For underspecification approaches (which do not treat "the" as ambiguous) developed with greater finesse than the version given here, see Bezuidenhout (1997) and Recanati (1993).

²⁷ Kripke's original words are: "Let's call something a *rigid designator* if in every possible world it designates the same object" (Kripke 1972/1980: 48). Kaplan (1989: 569–7, n.8) chronicles some of Kripke's responses to accusations that he changed his view.

a rigid designator [has] the same reference in all possible worlds. I ... don't mean to imply that the thing designated exists in all possible worlds, just that the name refers rigidly to that thing. (Kripke 1972/80: 77–8)

To express the contingency of Kripke's existence, we need "Kripke does not exist" to be true with respect to some world. On his view, a world w in which Kripke does not exist is still one at which "Kripke" designates Kripke. Since Kripke is not among the things which exist in w , the sentence "Kripke does not exist" is true with respect to w . It follows classically that "Something does not exist" is true with respect to w , which will be distasteful to some kinds of non-Meinongians. On the assumption that something exists only if there is something that it is, we also get the truth with respect to w of " $\neg\exists x x=\text{Kripke}$ ", and so, by classical reasoning, of " $\exists y\neg\exists x x=y$ " (see Wiggins 1995). Most people would think that this last is something that ought to be true with respect to no world: how could there be something which is not identical to anything? No problem of this kind arises within NFL, if only because it does not accept classical existential generalization. The natural explanation of why "Aristotle exists" is false with respect to a world in which Aristotle does not exist is the same as the explanation of why "Vulcan exists" is actually false: the referring expression fails to refer. The upshot is that "Hesperus is Phosphorus" is contingent, though it may well often be intended as a shortened form of the necessary "if Hesperus exists, then Hesperus is Phosphorus".²⁸

The intuitive idea behind rigidity is that actual referent (if any) projects onto all possibilities. We can make this precise without defining rigidity as sameness of referent at every world, and so without encountering the problems of the previous paragraph. A rigid expression with an actual referent refers to that object at each world at which the object exists, but refers to nothing at other worlds; a rigid expression with no actual referent has no referent at any world. One formulation of the general idea counts an expression e as rigid iff it meets the following condition:

- 37 for all worlds w , all objects y , (e actually designates y and y exists in w) iff e designates y with respect to w .²⁹

Any reasonable approach to rigidity, and certainly (37), allows that empty expressions can be rigid. NFL should take advantage of this, classifying empty referring expressions as rigid, along with non-empty ones. A consequence is that it is strictly false that Vulcan might have existed. Since "Vulcan" has no referent with respect to the actual world, if it is rigid it has no referent with respect to any world, so there is no world with respect to which "Vulcan exists" is true.³⁰ Those who think this is the wrong result confuse genuinely possible worlds with epistemic duplicates. Kripke has given us the resources to handle this issue: there is a possible world which Leverrier (before he learned the bad news) could not distinguish from the actual world and in

²⁸ Kripke's view also requires the necessity to be conditional, for even if "Hesperus" refers to Hesperus at a world in which Hesperus does not exist, Hesperus will not belong to any ordered pair in the identity relation at that world.

²⁹ Referring expressions are also temporally rigid. This needs to be defined along Kripkean lines, rather than following the structure of (37), since the referent of an expression at a time might be something which does not exist at that time.

³⁰ One could accept that there might have been such a planet as Vulcan, if "such as" means one like Vulcan was supposed to be.

which there is a planet which, had he known about it, he would have counted as verifying his “Vulcan” hypotheses. This does not amount to a world at which Vulcan exists.³¹

The essence of reference is closely connected with, and ultimately explains, the rigidity of referring expressions. We find it in Evans’s principle (P):

If S is an atomic sentence in which the n -place concept-expression R is combined with singular terms $t_1 \dots t_n$, then S is true iff \langle the referent of $t_1 \dots$ the referent of $t_n \rangle$ satisfies R . (Evans 1982: 49)

The restriction to atomic sentences looks forward to a point Evans makes later in the book, namely that definite descriptions are not singular terms (singular referring expressions). The principle ought to be neutral on whether there are any semantically complex “singular terms”. If there are, a sentence constructed out of these in the way Evans envisaged will not be atomic in the classical sense; we can just drop the restriction “atomic” from (P). The expression “singular term” is also less than ideal, for any plausibility the principle has extends also to plural referring expressions: no doubt “Russell and Whitehead wrote *Principia*” is true iff \langle the referent of “Russell and Whitehead”, the referent of “*Principia*” \rangle satisfies “wrote”. We can simply replace “singular term” by “referring expression”.

Are the definite descriptions lying between “ \langle ” and “ \rangle ” themselves referring expressions, or are they to be understood in Russell’s way?³² This is connected with how we should understand the possible worlds truth conditions supplied by (P). Evaluating a sentence to which (P) applies at some non-actual world, w , should we count the referent with respect to w of some referring expression, t , as the referent of t with respect to w or the referent of t with respect to the actual world? If the definite descriptions are referring expressions in the metalanguage, and referring expressions are rigid, the same object is involved however we answer, and this is intuitively the right result. If the definite descriptions are treated in a Russellian way, it would be clarifying to insert “actual” at some point. The Russellian version of (P), making also the small adjustments recommended in the previous paragraph, would read:

If S is a sentence in which the n -place concept-expression R is combined with referring expressions $t_1 \dots t_n$, then S is true iff for some x_1 , t_1 refers to x_1 with respect to the actual world, ... and for some x_n , t_n refers to x_n with respect to the actual world and $\langle x_1, \dots x_n \rangle$ satisfies R .

These metalanguage Russellized definite descriptions are in effect rigidified.

³¹ McDowell argues for *de re* senses, characterizing these in terms which seem to amount to rigidity: they are senses for which it is not the case that they are indifferent to whether they have a referent or not (cf McDowell 1984: 283). On the view proposed here, referring expressions which refer have their referent essentially, and for those which do not refer, their failure to refer is essential. Yet McDowell supposes that the *de re* character of a sense, that is, its rigidity, will ensure that it has a referent.

³² In a related discussion, Evans speaks of using “a metalinguistic definite description (‘the referent of “the author of *Waverley*”’) as a referring expression” (Evans 1982: 53). However, compare “all uses of definite descriptions in this book, both formal and informal, are intended to be understood according to the [Russellian quantificationalist] proposal I have tentatively put forward” (Evans 1982: 60).

If the thesis that all referring expressions are rigid is correct, and if suitable metalanguage definite descriptions are used as referring expressions, we can leave Evans's formulation of (P) almost unchanged: the relevant reference is the referent of t with respect to the actual world, which will be the very same object as its referent with respect to w . I will adopt the convention that an underlined definite description is to be treated as a referring expression, in which case (P) has its neatest formulation thus:

- 38 If S is a sentence in which the n -place concept-expression R is combined with referring expressions $t_1 \dots t_n$, then S is true iff <the referent of t_1 ... the referent of t_n > satisfies R .³³

The concluding thesis of this paper is that an expression is a referring expression if and only if it satisfies principle (P), optimally formulated as (38). Satisfaction of the principle ensures that any referring expression is modally rigid, and explains the source of the rigidity. It remains to ask why this thesis should be accepted.

There are ad hoc reasons relating to examples, like those offered by Kripke for proper names. These have generally been found convincing, so I will be brief. Kripke says that when we come to consider whether under certain circumstances it would have been true that Aristotle did not teach Alexander, we need to consider circumstances containing Aristotle, that is, containing the very man Aristotle who is in fact the referent of "Aristotle" (Kripke 1972/80: 62). This seems indubitable, and if it holds in general, as indeed it seems to do, suggests that "Aristotle" is rigid: when we use the name to speak of Aristotle, we intend to say something whose truth or falsehood, actual or counterfactual, depends on how things are with him. Since there was nothing special about this name it points to the general conclusion that all names are rigid.

It was important to Kripke to contrast the rigidity of names with the non-rigidity of many or most definite descriptions. The clearest examples of non-rigid definite descriptions are in predicative uses. One of Kripke's own examples (close to (33) above) is:

- 39 Someone other than the US President in 1970 might have been the US President in 1970. (Kripke 1972/1980: 48)

For this claim to be plausible, we need to understand the structure thus:

- 40 The x which was US President in 1970 is such that possibly $\exists y y \neq x$ such that y was the US President in 1970.

The natural truth conditions require the first occurrence of the definite description to be rigid. Normally, a definite description used with referential intentions is rigid. An utterance of "The teacher of Alexander did not teach Alexander" is obviously actually false. But how should we evaluate it with respect to other worlds? The answer which does justice to the referential intention is that it is true at just the worlds at which Aristotle did not teach Alexander: what matters is who was taught by the person who is in fact the referent of "the teacher of Alexander". The explanation is that this person is the target of the referential intentions, which are intentions to say something which would be true if and only if this person did not teach Alexander.

³³ Plurals are incorporated by taking the variables to be neutral in number and replacing "referent" by "referent or referents". A sequent satisfies a predicate by its members doing so, taken in their sequence-order.

The explanation of the fact that definite descriptions in predicate position are typically not rigid is that they are not used with referential intentions. They serve to characterize how things are with something presumed already available. The fact that definite descriptions in subject position are often rigid is explicable in similar terms. As Strawson said, the role of a referring expression is typically to help a speaker introduce an object for the rest of the sentence to say something about. When there is such an object, the speaker intends how things are with it to be what matters to truth, actual and counterfactual (and with respect to other times). This is what is reflected by Evans's principle (P), and this is why referring expressions are modally rigid.³⁴

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³⁴ My thanks to Ernie Lepore for helpful comments and editorial guidance on an early draft.

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