The functions and mechanics of language have been hotly debated in the last century by many thinkers, but one cannot make mention of the philosophy of language without citing one of the most influential figures of the discipline: Bertrand Russell. Many have challenged Russell's ideas on language (Wittgenstein, Strawson, etc.), but this paper will focus specifically on Keith Donnellan's response to the use of unique reference. In this paper, Russell and Donnellan's views on unique reference will be explored, and an argument will be made for which case best describes this particular lingual phenomenon.

In chapter sixteen of his work, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, Russell hones in on the linguistic phenomena known as uniquely referring. He begins by distinguishing between two different types of descriptions (in order to correctly identify *unique* referring), definite and indefinite. Each can be easily understood by the use of the articles *the* and *a*, respectively, with *the man* being a definite description, and *a man* being an indefinite description. It is important to note that Russell's use of the article *the* for definite descriptions is singular. According to Russell, "The only thing that distinguishes 'the so-and-so' from 'a so-and-so' is the implication of uniqueness" [Russell, 176]. In this case, definite descriptions may be said to imply the existence of a unique subject or object. For example, when one asks to place a book on *the* table, it is clear that there is one and only one table that the speaker wishes the book to be placed on, regardless of whether this is successfully communicated to the listener.

However, Russell has an axe to grind with his contemporaries such as Frege and Meinong, specifically in regards to the description and reference of nonexistent objects. Frege posited that statements about nonexistent objects could not have a truth value, and Meinong even

suggested a plane of reality disparate from the material world (Übersein) to accommodate them. Russell would like to say that sentences describing nonexistent objects are false (here, referring is an implicit but necessary condition of description, because something must be described). To best explain this, the sentence *The King of France is bald* will be analyzed in accordance with Russell's thought. According to Russell, *The King of France is bald* is a tripartite statement which asserts that: 1. Something is King of France, 2. There is only one King of France, and 3. Whatever is King of France is bald. In this example, all three implicit statements in *The King of France is bald* fail due to the falsity of statement 1. When evaluated this way, every sentence that serves to denote, refer, describe, etc. is a composite proposition. Furthermore, these composite propositions operate conjunctively; for a descriptive statement to be true, all implicit statements within the composite statement must also be true. If there were a King of France who was not bald, but in fact had luscious locks similar to Troy Polamalu (former strong safety for the Pittsburgh Steelers), then the sentence *The King of France is bald* would also be false, but its falsity would be based on statement 3 (Whatever is King of France is bald). This type of falsity is not of Russell's concern, however.

While there may not be a corporeal King of France, one may argue that the King of France still exists either in literature or other mediums. Russell is able to quickly dismiss this concern by comparing the existential properties of a physical being and a fictitious one; despite the alleged existence of a fictitious character on paper, its radical subjectivity and dependence on other minds proves insufficient for any reference or description within the domain of relevant or interesting truth value. More precisely, Russell himself says, "When you have taken account of all the feelings roused by Napoleon in writers and readers of history, you have not touched the

actual man; but in the case of Hamlet you have come to the end of him. If no one thought about Hamlet, there would be nothing left of him…" [Russell, 169-170]. Perhaps Russell's stance can be stated even more succinctly; "Every proposition in which a description which describes nothing has a primary occurrence is false" [Russell, 179]. When discussing names, Russell makes it clear that a name is not synonymous with a description, and a name can be devoid of content. Despite being able to throw around the word *unicorn*, the name (which is synonymous with the description of a magical horse with a horn on its head) describes nothing and is therefore false, since no such unicorn exists.

Keith Donnellan complicates Russell's picture of uniquely referring expressions by arguing for two uses of definite descriptions: referential use and attributive use. The attributive function of a definite description serves to connect a particular property to the referent, whereas the referential function of a definite description serves to enable a listener to "pick out whom or what [they are] talking about and states something about that person or thing" [Donnellan, 285]. As implied by the name, the attributive function hinges on whether or not the attribute mentioned sticks to the subject. Donnellan believes that Russell provides a satisfactory account of the attributive function of a definite description, but ultimately fails to incorporate referential use. Donnellan grounds his arguments in Russellian terms when he says, "On Russell's view a definite description may denote an entity: 'if 'C' is a denoting phrase, it may happen that there is one entity *x* for which the proposition '*x* is identical with C' is true...We may then say that the entity *x* is the denotation of the phrase 'C'" [Donnellan, 281]. One point Donnellan would like to make is that *C* may refer to what a speaker believes to be *x* when in fact *C* objectively refers to *y*.

As a result, the speaker has failed attributively by pushing *C* on *x* when in fact it denotes *y*, but the listener may referentially succeed in identifying the speaker's original desired referent, *x*.

An example, though rather dark, provided by Donnellan will make this distinction more clear. The statement *Smith's murderer is insane* appears to be clearly attributive- linking the property of insanity to a referent, Smith's murderer. However, the statement may also succeed when implemented referentially. Perhaps Smith's murderer is identified as Jones, and Jones displays erratic behavior while in a courtroom during the trial for Smith's murder. To say, "Smith's murderer is insane" operates with a referential emphasis, specifically identifying Jones as Smith's murderer and subsequently attributing the insanity to Jones. In the event that Jones was in fact not Smith's murderer, the referential component of the description still succeeds; the man in the courtroom behaving erratically (Jones) is insane, even if he was initially misidentified as Smith's murderer. As a result, it seems that the truth value of the definite description was salvaged where it would not have been under Russell's model. It is true that the insane person is not Smith's murderer, but for communicative purposes the statement has succeeded in establishing reference to a subject which matches the initial description.

A more straightforward example presented by Donnellan may be of help here. If one is at a party and sees a noteworthy person holding a martini glass filled with water and asks, "Who is the person drinking a martini?" the individual intended to be uniquely referred to is still identifiable to the person being asked the question, despite the referent not drinking a martini at all. Again, a definite description has succeeded referentially while failing attributively.

Investigating Russell and Donnellan's views raises multiple questions, one of the most immediate being "Is the failure of description in uniquely referring significant?" The answer to this question largely depends on what aspects of language a user emphasizes. One could argue that Russell takes a more formal approach by emphasizing the truth value of various statements. This makes sense given his background and interest in mathematics. Donnellan, however, may see this as secondary to the purpose of language, but this is merely speculation. In regards to specificity, Donnellan does well by distinguishing between two separate types of definite descriptive actions that Russell had previously glossed over, but Russell's argument is both intuitive in its identification of falsity and robust in regards to its mathematical justification.

One could suggest that Donnellan's dissection of Russell's denoting is largely uninteresting; Russell may easily cede that a successful reference has been made from speaker to listener when deploying an inaccurate attribution, but the statement would be false nonetheless. In this case, Donnellan's model can be absorbed by Russell's. However, just as a definite description/unique reference can fail in one of Donnellan's categories, there are cases where an attributive failure can also coincide with a failed reference, and Russell's model would not be able to identify the source of falsity. Russell may also accuse proponents of Donnellan's argument of using "bad" language (bad not in a moral sense, but bad as in imprecise or sloppy). There must be times where a failed attribution is so strong that it frustrates the referential aspect of a sentence. If one were to point to a book on the table and call it a unicorn, the communicative and designative function of language have failed horrifically. One has indeed referred to an item on the table, but the listener would sooner respond with inquiries about the unicorn than retrieve the book. However, these concerns are largely tangential to the issue at hand.

One may argue that there is now a particular promiscuity tied to unique reference in light of Donnellan's proposition to split attributive and referential descriptions. However, Donnellan appears to have presented the better case for explaining the operative underpinnings of definite descriptions by making this distinction. Donnellan's argument sheds light on different emphases that a user of language can have. While counterintuitive, truth and falsity of a unique reference may not be priority to a speaker as long as a particular referent has been identified by a listener. In the same way a pronoun may hold ambiguous meaning in a sentence such as *The maid cleaned the carpet in her apartment* (where the possessive *her* could refer to the maid or the person the maid works for), an incorrect attributive action may also be ambiguous but nonetheless successfully communicate a message to a speaker. In the case of a pronoun and an incorrect attribution, a sufficient amount of context shared between the speaker and listener can remedy complications that could potentially arise when analyzing sentences in a vacuum.

In short, Russell's view of uniquely referring expressions, while profound, only operates neatly in formalized settings. Donnellan presents a case that is more digestible and accommodating of language used with communicative purposes grounded in a real world setting, and for this reason, Donnellan's view is in many ways more informative (I would object to using the word better, but perhaps more applicable and/or thorough).

One may argue that is the wrong book (referent) was retrieved, then the request would have failed both attributively and referentially.

Chose two from Frege, Russell, Strawson and Donnellan and explain the view of each about uniquely referring expressions. Which of the two that you chose has the better case? And is it the best overall case? Why?

Donnellan Notes:

“On Russell’s view a definite description may denote an entity: ‘if ‘C’ is a denoting phrase, it may happen that there is one entity *x* for which the proposition ‘*x* is identical with C’ is true” [Donnellan, 281].

“We may then say that the entity *x* is the denotation of the phrase ‘C’” [Donnellan, 281].

“Both Russell and Strawson assume that where the presupposition or implication is false, the truth value of what the speaker says is affected. For Russell, the statement made is false...Now if there are *two* uses of definite descriptions, it may be that the truth value is affected differently in each case by the falsity of the presupposition or implication” [Donnellan, 283].

“I will call the two uses of definite descriptions I have in mind the attributive use and the referential use. 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, 285].

“In the attributive use, the attribute of being the so-and-so is all important, while it is not in the referential use” [Donnellan, 285].

*Smith’s murderer is insane- attributing a property to x.
*Smith’s murderer is insane- referring to Jones in a courtroom. Jones is Smith’s murderer. Jones is insane. Attributively incorrect, but referentially sufficient, and Jones may be insane.

“Linsky correctly points out that one does not fail to refer simply because the description used does not in fact fit anything...Here, however, I use this fact about referring to make a distinction I believe he does not draw, between two uses of definite descriptions” [Donnellan, 286 (footnote)].

*Something can fail attributively but succeed referentially.

“It is, moreover, perfectly possible for our audience to know to whom we refer, in the second situation, even though they do not share our presupposition (that Jones is Smith’s murderer)” [Donnellan, 286-287 (my parenthetical note added)].

“Suppose one is at a party and, seeing an interesting-looking person holding a martini glass, one asks, ‘Who is this man drinking a martini?’ If it should turn out that there is only water in the glass, one has nevertheless asked a question about a particular person, a question that it is possible for someone to answer” [Donnellan, 287].

“In the referential use of a definite description we may succeed in picking out a person or thing to ask a question about even though he or it does not really fit the description; but in the attributive use if nothing fits the description, no straight-forward answer to the question can be given” [Donnellan, 287].

*Is that unicorn black? Referential pass, but attributive failure.

Here one may argue that Donnellan's dissection of Russell's denoting fails; Russell may easily cede that a successful reference has been made from speaker to listener, but the statement would be false nonetheless. (make sure to go into more detail here).

"In the one case the definite description was a device for getting the other person to pick the right book; if he is able to pick the right book even though it does not *satisfy* the description, one still succeeds in his purpose" [Donnellan, 288].
*In this case, this uniquely referring question succeeds despite its attributive failure. Russell would need to accommodate for the success in referring as well as the failed description. Is the failure of description significant? One may argue that is the wrong book (referent) was retrieved, then the request would have failed both attributively and referentially.

Russell Notes:
Description- definite "the" or indefinite "a"

"In the case of 'unicorn,' for example, there is only the concept: there is not also, something where among the shades, something unreal which may be called 'a unicorn'" [Russell, 168].
"Logic, I should maintain, must no more admit a unicorn than zoology can…" [Russell, 169].

"When you have taken account of all the feelings roused by Napoleon in writers and readers of history, you have not touched the actual man; but in the case of Hamlet you have come to the end of him. If no one thought about Hamlet, there would be nothing left of him…" [Russell, 169-170].

"A robust sense of reality is very necessary in framing a correct analysis of propositions about unicorns, golden mountains, round squares, and other such pseudo-objects" [Russell, 170].

"'A unicorn' is an indefinite description which describes nothing" [Russell, 170].

"In the proposition, 'I met a unicorn,' the whole four words together make a significant proposition, and the word 'unicorn' by itself is significant in just the same sense as the word 'man.' But the *two* words 'a unicorn' do not form a subordinate group having a meaning of its own" [Russell, 170].

"We have, then, two things to compare: (1) a *name*, which is a simple symbol, directly designating an individual which is its meaning, and having this meaning in its own right, independently of the meanings of all other words; (2) a *description*, which consists of several words, whose meanings are already fixed, and from which results whatever is to be taken as the "meaning" of the description. [Russell, 174].

"A proposition containing a description is not identical with what that proposition becomes when a name is substituted, even if the name names the same object as the description describes" [Russell, 174].

“The only thing that distinguishes ‘the so-and-so’ from ‘a so-and-so’ is the implication of uniqueness” [Russell, 176].

“‘The author of *Waverley*’ is ‘the term satisfying the function ‘x wrote *Waverley* ’‘“ [Russell, 177].

“Every proposition in which a description which describes nothing has a primary occurrence is false” [Russell, 179].

“It is only of descriptions- definite or indefinite- that existence can be significantly asserted…” [Russell, 179].