

Definite descriptions are ambiguous

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1. The problem

Keith Donnellan (1966) contrasted two uses of definite descriptions, the referential and the attributive. In using a definite description referentially the speaker communicates content about a particular object in mind,¹ whereas in using the same description attributively the speaker communicates content about whatever object uniquely satisfies the description.

Assuming that definite descriptions have a quantificational attributive meaning, the main problem raised by Donnellan's contrast between uses is whether descriptions also have a referential meaning.² If they do, it is plausible to think *that the definite article is ambiguous between a referential and an attributive meaning*. In what follows, I will call this thesis 'Ambiguity'. For ease of exposition, I will take it as a thesis about English.

The most influential arguments against Ambiguity invoke the independently motivated Gricean distinction between what a speaker *means* and what he or she *says* (Grice 1989). According to these arguments, we do not need to postulate a referential meaning for definite descriptions to account for referential uses. We can account for such uses in terms of what a speaker means but does not literally say. Thus, in using a definite description referentially the speaker means or communicates content about a particular object in mind, but what the speaker literally says is determined by the description's quantificational attributive meaning. We are then told that on the grounds of parsimony this account of referential uses is superior to Ambiguity (see Grice 1969; Kripke 1977; Bach 1981; Neale 1990).

I think all such arguments against Ambiguity have been seriously weakened in the face of the following points: (a) definite descriptions are *regularly* used referentially, and this shows that there is no *prima facie* reason to deny that referential uses are literal; actually, this usage regularity strongly suggests that referential uses are literal, just as literal as attributive uses (Devitt 1997; Reimer 1998; compare Neale 2004); (b) complex demonstratives and referentially used definite descriptions are used similarly in a *wide* variety of situations, and this strongly suggests that both expressions have a similar referential meaning (Devitt 2004) (e.g. '*That/the* concert last night was great, wasn't it?'; see footnote 8); (c) referentially used 'incomplete' descriptions may be used to express truths even when speakers *cannot* provide completions for them, and this also strongly suggests that descriptions have a referential meaning (e.g. '*the tall kid* who used to sit in the front row in first grade was born in Rio de Janeiro') (Wilson 1991; Devitt 2004; compare Wettstein 1981; Schiffer 2005). Thus, not only do I think that the Gricean arguments above do not succeed in undermining Ambiguity. I also think there is a strong case *for* Ambiguity.

¹ The approach to having an object in mind I favor says that a speaker has an object in mind only if he or she has perceived the object or is linked to it by a Kripkean causal-historical chain (Devitt 1974).

² The referential and attributive meanings of a definite description may be understood thus: if the definite description is referential, its meaning is partly constituted by the object the speaker has in mind. If the description is attributive, it has a Russellian quantificational meaning. For an alternative view on attributive definite descriptions see Szabó 2000.

Yet, not everyone would agree. One source of concern, perhaps the only one still standing at this point, involves the issue of definite descriptions in other languages. Two arguments involving this issue have been employed in the literature to discredit Ambiguity.

The first makes use of the following test for the detection of lexical ambiguities (see Kripke 1977):

(D) Examine languages other than the home language and see whether the home language ambiguity is removed.³ If no language removes this ambiguity, it is probable that it is not genuine in the home language.

Applying this test to 'the', we have the following: since there seems to be no language with two definite articles, one referential, the other attributive, it seems that 'the' is not referential-attributive ambiguous (see Ludlow and Neale 2006).

The second argument against Ambiguity involving definite descriptions in other languages was recently voiced by Kent Bach (2004). In a nutshell, this argument says that if 'the' were referential-attributive ambiguous we would be faced with a remarkable cross-linguistic fact: that an ambiguous word in English is translated into likewise ambiguous words in many other languages. Presumably, this cross-linguistic fact is remarkable because there is no plausible explanation for it. Denying that 'the' has a referential meaning frees one from the duty of providing such an explanation.

My main purpose in this paper is to show that these two arguments against Ambiguity do not work. In section 2, I will address Bach's argument. In section 3, I will address the argument based on the D-test. To conclude, in section 4, I will claim that once we couple the findings of the present discussion with the independent arguments for Ambiguity the case for Ambiguity is made.

2. *Cross-linguistic coincidences?*

In a recent publication, Kent Bach writes

...the thesis that definite descriptions have referential meanings misses the cross-linguistic generalization that, in any language that has a definite article, definite descriptions have double uses. It would be a remarkable fact that an ambiguous word ('the' in this case) in one language should have translations in numerous other languages that are ambiguous in precisely the same way. (2004: 226–7)

I think Bach is right to suggest that in many languages there is just one definite article with at least two standard uses, one referential, the other attributive. And he raises an interesting point with respect to this fact, captured by the following question: if 'the' is indeed referential-attributive ambiguous, how can we explain it being translated into similarly ambiguous articles in many other languages? I think the Ambiguity theorist has an answer to this question. And the essential part of this answer involves the existence of different kinds of lexical ambiguity. Let me elaborate.

³ To a first approximation, a lexical ambiguity at home is removed in another language if the senses conventionally associated with the ambiguous word at home are each conventionally associated with different words of the other language (see Kripke 1977: 19).

Broadly put, there are two kinds of lexical ambiguity in natural languages: homonymies and polysemies. Consider polysemies first. It is common to understand polysemies as the product of conceptual associations made by speakers (Ravin and Leacock 2001: 2). Thus, take the English word ‘foot’. English speakers commonly talk of the feet of chairs, stools, tables or the foot of a mountain. Plausibly, these secondary uses of ‘foot’ originated in associations with the concept of human foot, associations like <that part of a table is like the foot of a person in that it is at the bottom of the table, gives support to it...>. With time these secondary uses became conventionalized and a secondary meaning to ‘foot’ came to life: <base>. Or take the word ‘mouth’. English speakers also speak regularly of the mouth of a bottle, the mouth of a cave or the mouth of an oven. Plausibly, these secondary uses arose of associations with the concept of animal mouth, associations like <that part of a bottle is like the mouth of an animal in that it is an obviously visible opening to the bottle, is used for filling the bottle...>. With time these secondary uses became conventionalized and a secondary meaning to ‘mouth’ was born: <opening>.

Now, just as English speakers conventionally use the word for human foot and the word for animal mouth in these ways, speakers of other languages do too. In Portuguese, for example, people conventionally use ‘pé’ – the word for human foot – to speak of the feet of chairs, stools, tables, and the foot of a mountain. And they conventionally use ‘boca’ – the word for animal mouth – to speak of the mouth of a cave, bottle or oven. Moreover, there are Portuguese counterparts of many other English polysemies.⁴ And the same is true of various other languages (see Sweetser 1990; Heine and Kuteva 2002; Traugott and Dasher 2005). Now, this is not a cross-linguistic coincidence. What best explains it is that the mechanism of generation of polysemies, conceptual association, is independent of the particular languages speakers in fact speak.

Homonymous expressions, in contrast, very commonly express meanings that do not display any interesting relation, being instead the product of phonological, or at least orthographical, convergences peculiar to a particular language. Thus, take the graph ‘bass’ in Modern English. One of its meanings is related to a kind of fish and is derived from Old English ‘bærs’. Yet, another of its meanings is related to the lowest register of the male voice and is derived from an entirely different word: ‘basso’ in Italian (Ravin and Leacock 2001: 2–3). Now, the fact that that graph is associated with those two meanings is a peculiar fact of *Modern English*, and should not be expected to have any interesting bearing on the existence of lexical ambiguities in other, unrelated languages. For, why would the orthographical convergence of two different words with radically different meanings in one language have any interesting connection to the lexical ambiguities of other, unrelated languages?

With these considerations in mind and turning anew to definite descriptions, we find a plausible reason for Bach’s charge that on the Ambiguity view it is remarkable that ‘the’ should be translated into likewise ambiguous articles in many other languages: a tacit assumption that on the Ambiguity view ‘the’ is *homonymous*. I fully concur that if the alleged ambiguity of ‘the’ were homonymy, it would be remarkable that ‘the’ were translated into likewise ambiguous articles in many other languages – just like it would be remarkable, for example, if ‘bass’ turned out to be translated into single graphs

⁴ For example: ‘green’_{color}, ‘green’_{immature}, ‘rusty’_{affected by rust}, ‘rusty’_{impaired by disuse}, ‘translate’_{from one language to another}, ‘translate’_{explain}, ‘close’_{spatial}, ‘close’_{time}, etc.

meaning <perch> and <deep sounding male voice> in many other languages. Yet, there is no plausible reason for the Ambiguity view to allege that `the' is homonymous. In fact, I do not think that anyone has alleged that `the' is homonymous, and given what the *OED* says about the etymology of `the', it would be rather odd if they did. For, the *OED* says that `the' is the reduced and uninflected stem of the later Old English demonstrative `the', `théo', `thæt', a state of affairs that makes it rather implausible that the referential-attributive multiplicity of sense associated with `the' is the result of the phonological and orthographical convergence of two different words, one with a referential meaning, the other with an attributive one.

If, on the other hand, `the' is referential-attributive *polysemous*, it is not remarkable or coincidental that `the' should be translated into likewise ambiguous articles in many other languages. For, polysemies are grounded on thought associations speakers make independently of the particular languages they speak. And in virtue of this polysemies carry over across different languages.⁵ Since no one has provided an argument showing that `the' is not polysemous, no one has shown, pace Bach, that it is remarkable or coincidental that `the' should be translated into likewise ambiguous articles in many other languages.

Moreover, it is rather likely that if `the' is ambiguous it is polysemous. For, as pointed out above, `the' is unlikely homonymous. Furthermore, plausible derivations of the referential meaning from the attributive one and vice-versa are found, just as we would expect if `the' were indeed referential-attributive polysemous. Let us look at these derivations in turn.

Supposing the attributive meaning came first, we have the following derivation: when `the F' applies uniquely to the object the speaker has in mind, the speaker may use the attributive meaning of `the F' to communicate content about that object in particular. For, the attributive meaning of `the F' *identifies* that object. If instead `the F' applies non-uniquely to the object the speaker has in mind, the speaker may use its attributive meaning, with the help of the required mechanisms of utterance completion,⁶ to communicate content about that object in particular. For, the attributive meaning of `the F', with the help of the required mechanisms of utterance completion, identifies that object. With time and widespread use in the community, a convention of using `the F' to express content about an F-object in mind is formed, making `the F' referential-attributive polysemous.

It is worth noting, furthermore, that critics of Ambiguity will be asked to show how the referential contents associated with referential uses are derived from the single attributive meaning definite descriptions have according to the critics. Any explanation they give may be adopted by the Ambiguity theorist to explain how, with time and widespread use in the community, descriptions *became* referential-attributive polysemous. What basis have Ambiguity critics to object?

⁵ In fact, some linguists use cross-linguistic evidence to determine whether an alleged ambiguity is homonymy or polysemy: if the ambiguity carries over to unrelated languages, it is likely polysemy. See Haiman 1978 and Croft 2003.

⁶ What these mechanisms of utterance completion are and how speakers and their audiences exploit them are controversial matters I will not tackle here. I simply assume that there must be such mechanisms and that speakers and audiences succeed in exploiting them, at least in many cases.

If the referential meaning came first, we have the following derivation instead: when referential 'the F' is uttered in a context where there is no perceptually available F and the speaker has no particular F in mind, this being clear to the audience, the speaker may use 'the F' to communicate at least that there is an F. For, the referential meaning of the type 'the F' directs speakers to use 'the F' when there is an F. Given, moreover, that speaker and audience share knowledge that there can be only one F, the speaker may use 'the F' to communicate not only that there is an F, but also that there is only one. For example, suppose that in 2007 the speaker utters, 'the soccer team that wins the FIFA World Cup of Soccer in 2010 will get a cash prize'. Supposing the speaker does not have a particular team in mind, and that there can be only one such team, this being clear to the audience, the speaker may utter the definite description to communicate not only that there will be such a team but also that there will be only one. (Replacing '*the* soccer team...' above with '*that* soccer team...' gives us clearer insight into *what it would be like* to use referential descriptions to express attributive content in a language without attributive descriptions.)

If the referential description applies to more than one object, the derivation is similar, except that now the speaker will need further help from the context to communicate the intended attributive content. For example, suppose the speaker utters, 'the mayor ought to be impeached,' while driving through a small town with bumpy roads in a foreign country (Evans 1982: 324). Supposing it is clear that the speaker is not talking about a particular mayor in mind, the speaker may use 'the mayor' to communicate at least that there is a mayor. For, the referential meaning of the type 'the mayor' directs speakers to use 'the mayor' when there is a mayor. Given further contextual clues (e.g. the geographical position of speaker and audience at the time of the utterance) and shared encyclopedic knowledge (e.g. that towns have only one mayor), not only may the speaker communicate that there is a mayor, but also that there is only one as specified by the clues in the light of the shared encyclopedic knowledge. Since there are no attributive descriptions at this stage of the language, it is very useful to use referential descriptions in the attributive way. Hence, it is plausible to suppose that with time a convention of using referential 'the F' to express attributive content is born, making 'the F' referential-attributive polysemous.

To conclude: we have very good reason to think that if 'the' is ambiguous it is polysemous. And by the same token we have very good reason to think that Bach's worries about Ambiguity are exaggerated. For, on the Ambiguity view there is no coincidence in the fact that 'the' is translated into similarly ambiguous articles in many other languages. These cross-linguistic similarities are very plausibly grounded on the *polysemic* character of these articles.

3. Kripke's D-test

Yet, one may point out that if 'the' were indeed ambiguous, some language or other would remove this ambiguity. Since there seems to be no such language, 'the' does not seem to be ambiguous. This is Kripke's D-test.

In response, I should say the following: (1) it is unclear that the D-test is an appropriate test for polysemies, and (2) even if it is, its application does not undermine Ambiguity. Let me explain each point in turn.

First, the D-test is based on the principle that ambiguities at home are probably removed in other languages. This principle, even though very plausible for homonymies, is dubious for polysemies. After all, many polysemies may very well be universal, and if they are universal, the D-test is not an appropriate test for the presence of polysemy, hence not an appropriate test for whether 'the' is referential-attributive polysemous.

Second, even if we *assume* that the D-test is an appropriate test for polysemies, Ambiguity critics are still not out of the woods. For, there is no comprehensive and detailed cross-linguistic study of definite articles, and there may well be languages that remove the alleged referential-attributive polysemy of 'the'. In fact, there are several languages with *two* definite articles with *different meanings*, a state of affairs that suggests a lot more cross-linguistic variation in definite articles than what is usually recognized. Let us look at two examples.

Malagasy, an Austronesian language, has two definite articles: 'ny' and 'ilay' (Keenan and Ebert 1973). *Ilay*-descriptions are only used to refer to a particular object 'the hearer has specifically identified prior to the utterance' (423), whereas *ny*-descriptions are variously used: attributively, in the way *ilay*-descriptions are, and in other ways. (Neither definite description is used deictically; demonstratives must be employed for that purpose). Thus, *ilay*-descriptions are always referential, whereas *ny*-descriptions can be either referential or attributive.

Mönchengladbach, a Low Franconian dialect spoken in the northwest of Germany, also has two definite articles: the 'D ϵ -article' and the 'D α -article' (Hartmann 1982). D ϵ -descriptions are mainly used deictically or anaphorically. (Anaphoric D ϵ -descriptions take both referential and attributive antecedents.) D α -descriptions, in contrast, are not used 'in any sense deictically or anaphorically' (194), but are used instead generically as in 'the whale is a mammal' or when unique application holds (195–7). This unique application use subdivides mainly in two: (i) the attributive use, where the speaker does not intend to talk about a particular object in mind (e.g. 'the next mayor will have a lot of work to do after the elections'), and (ii) the 'past-tense' referential use,⁷ where the speaker intends to refer to a particular object perceived in the past, and unique application holds within a domain of shared memory with the audience (e.g. 'I think the apartment is too small for us', after speaker and audience leave an apartment building, having visited one unit to see if it is worth renting). In brief, whereas D ϵ -descriptions, modulo anaphora, are very commonly used deictic-referentially, D α -descriptions are never used in this way, being used generically, attributively, and past-tense referentially instead.

Now, these facts look discouraging to those seeking a neat removal of the alleged polysemy of 'the'. For, clearly, there is referential-attributive overlap between the two articles in these two languages. Despite this, it is worth considering two things. First, homonymies are typically removed very neatly in other languages; one word (of the other language) for each meaning, and no interesting meaning overlap between the two words. On the assumption that polysemies should be removed in other languages too, why *require* their removals to be as neat as those of homonymies? Second, depending on how

⁷ I borrow the label 'past-tense' from Gareth Evans's discussion of 'past-tense demonstratives' (1982: 306), an example of which is 'that Czech lady last night was a riot, wasn't she?' uttered by a speaker who intends to refer to a particular lady perceived the night before. Since the complex demonstrative occurrence in such cases is almost always replaceable by the corresponding referentially used description, I call the corresponding descriptions 'past-tense'.

much meaning overlap there is between the two words in the other language that allegedly remove a home language polysemy, there may well be *no fact of the matter* about whether we actually have a removal. Consequently, it seems to me hasty to conclude that the alleged polysemy of ‘the’ is *not* removed in Malagasy or Mönchengladbach.

In any event, for the purposes of the present discussion, the key point about the D-test and ‘the’ is this: even if we assume that the test is reliable for polysemies we should not take for granted that Ambiguity would not pass the test. *There are thousands of natural languages* – estimated 5000–7000 (Crystal 2000) – *and no comprehensive study of their definite articles*. Malagasy and Mönchengladbach clearly suggest that Ambiguity might very well pass the test. Consequently, pending a comprehensive cross-linguistic study of definite articles, using the D-test to undermine Ambiguity is clearly inefficient, even if we assume that the test is reliable for polysemies, an assumption itself in need of justification.

4. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I claim to have shown two things. First, that on the Ambiguity view it is not coincidental that ‘the’ is translated into similarly ambiguous articles in many other languages. For, if ‘the’ is ambiguous, it is very likely polysemous, and polysemies are very often translated into similarly polysemous words in many other languages. Second, I claim to have shown that an application of Kripke’s D-test to ‘the’ fails to undermine Ambiguity. For one thing, it remains to be seen whether the D-test is reliable for polysemies. For another, much more needs to be said about world languages and their articles before the test can be fruitfully run on ‘the’. Thus, I conclude that critics of Ambiguity have not succeeded in using evidence from other languages to discredit Ambiguity.

Once these findings are coupled with the fact that definite descriptions are *regularly* used referentially, that complex demonstratives and definite descriptions are *widely* used similarly,⁸ and that referentially used ‘incomplete’ descriptions may be used to express truths even when speakers *cannot* complete them, the case for Ambiguity is made. For, it is not so easy to see which arguments are still left for Ambiguity critics to show otherwise.⁹

⁸ It is worth noting that the similarities in use between definite descriptions and complex demonstratives are not restricted to *deictic* uses; they carry over to *past-tense* uses and *anaphoric* uses with referential antecedents. Moreover, they hold under any type of speech act. In this way, *there seems to be a systematic convergence in the referential uses* of these two expressions. Examples: [Past-tense use]: ‘Where’s *that/the* philosophy book I got yesterday?’ [Anaphoric use]: ‘You are prohibited from getting close to Jill Lennox. *This/the* girl is simply bad news.’ [Deictic use]: ‘Shut *that/the* door.’ It would be remarkable if this systematic convergence were not grounded on a similar referential semantics for both expressions (see Devitt 2004: 288).

⁹ I’m grateful to Edward Keenan and Dietrich Hartmann for helpful discussions on the Malagasy and Mönchengladbach definite articles respectively. I’m grateful to Kent Bach, Karen Ebert, Robert Fiengo, Richard Mendelsohn, Gary Ostertag, Frank Pupa, Marga Reimer, Zoltán Gendler Szabó and an anonymous referee for *Analysis* for helpful suggestions. I’m especially grateful to Michael Devitt for extensive comments and very helpful suggestions.

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