

Forums / PRAGMATICS Forum / 6_Reference and Definiteness / Referential vs. Attributive Definite Descriptions



Referential vs. Attributive Definite Descriptions - Rebekah Blonski (rmb290) 2019-03-12

20:15:55.0

In the Donnellan reading, his example of the difference between the referential and attributive use of definite descriptions, it reminded me of a few particular instances growing up as the youngest girl in my family (you'll see in a moment). His example to explain such a difference was with the use of commands that contain definite descriptions. When someone says "Bring me ***the book on the table***," he says that if it's used referentially, the sentence wouldn't be false if it was the case that the book wasn't where the speaker had told the hearer. It could very well be *on* or *beside* the table. That could be the book that the speaker was ***referring*** to. As professor talked about in class though, there is context to keep in mind. To contrast the referential, he says that suppose the table is an antique and you know that there wouldn't be any books placed upon it. The command "bring me the book on the table," couldn't be fulfilled because no such book would be on that table. Correct me if i'm wrong, but the attribute itself (I think...) is "the book on the table." So does the necessary attribute of it being on the table make the command, "bring me the book on the table," false? Because we know that no book would ever be on the table? This use of commands with definite descriptions reminds me of growing up and my siblings would always ask me to grab this or that and if it wasn't in that exact location, I would return empty handed and make them go look for themselves. Often times they would say it was right here (under, on top of, pretty much anywhere other than what was mentioned). It's interesting because the referential case does hold true in this context. Even though it fails to hold truth in the specificity of the location, the thing being referred too didn't change.

Anyone else have lazy siblings who have been low-key showing you a linguistic phenomenon?



Re: Referential vs. Attributive Definite Descriptions - Marija Landeka (ml1273) 2019-03-13

11:54:05.0

Hi Rebekah, you bring up an interesting point with this post. In my opinion, just because the book doesn't belong on the table, doesn't infer that it isn't there. As professor mentioned in class, there could still be some truth to the sentence, "bring me the book on the table" because both the book and the table exist, whether they are grouped together or not. I liked how you put a personal example because I'm sure many of us can relate to it. This has happened many times to me as well when someone has told me to grab something when it wasn't actually there. In that case, it was likely nearby and I would still grab it for them, making their statement hold some sort of truth value because the object they were asking for still existed even though it might not have been in the location they thought it was in.



Re: Referential vs. Attributive Definite Descriptions - Kenneth Maneely (klm337) 2019-03-13

15:54:04.0

Hi Rebekah. The situation with your siblings reminds me of the differences between Strawson's and Donnellan's theories on definite determiners. When your sibling returned without the book because it was on the table, it was like the Strawson's perception of a statement having no truth value, so they didn't act further to check and see if the book existed in other places because there was no book for them to find. However, when you insisted they should have looked, it was like the Donnellan interpretation of the referential definite determiner that still refers to something that exists, despite the determiner being incorrect like in the example of Smith's Murderer in class.



Re: Referential vs. Attributive Definite Descriptions - Erin Lavielle (etl37) 2019-03-13 17:15:44.0

Hey Rebekah!

- I think you bring up an interesting point about context! Looking at Donnellan's example of the antique table like you mentioned, it's interesting to think about, because it shows how important mutual understanding/knowledge between person A and person B is. I'm not sure if this is right, but with the necessary attribute of the book being on the table, is it possible for the command to be true from person A's perspective but false from person B's perspective? Person A thinks the book is referential, since they are referring to a specific book (and they don't know books can't be placed on the antique table). For person B, however, the book is not referential since they know books are not allowed on the antique table. So can the command be true for the speaker but false for the person they are speaking to? Also, instances like this happen all the time in my house with my siblings and parents. When asked to get a specific form/piece of paper that is not in the spot they said it was in, I come back empty-handed because I don't know which paper they are referring to!



Re: Referential vs. Attributive Definite Descriptions - Devin Natishyn (dpn30) 2019-03-13

18:15:32.0

Hi Rebekah,

I think this example shows an interesting way to look at the interrelation between attributive and referential definite descriptions. Specifically, it shows how those engaged in an exchange are aware of both (or at least the possibility of both) types of definite description. Asking your sibling to bring you the book on the table when the book was beside the table thereby causing them to come back with nothing shows a focus on the attributive, focusing on the property of being on the table. A sibling might do this on purpose just to be mean, even if they know which book you were referring to. If they knew which book you meant, they are still aware of the referential description intended and the meaning and *chose* to follow one over the other. I think that these errors (whether intentional or not) occur very often, showing how dynamic the two types of definite descriptions are. I might argue that in most situations, conversation partners are aware of the two different possible definite descriptions and choose which one makes the most sense depending on the context.



Re: Referential vs. Attributive Definite Descriptions - Veronica Cardiellos (vpc19) 2019-03-13

20:06:20.0

Hi Rebekah!

As many of my classmates emphasized, the book and the table both exist even if they do not exist together. This is an extremely important detail because it contributes to the truth value of the statement. Just like in class when we discussed "Smiths murderer is insane" Smiths murderer exists even if who we believe to be the murderer is not who actually killed him. These phrases would only be complicated if Smith was not murdered or if the table does not exist. If this was so than the main subject is nonexistent and therefore untrue. Another example I know I have experienced is when my parents would say "can you walk the cat". Immediately I knew they meant "walk the dog" but there is still a cat in my house that exists and an action of walking that exists. What I wonder is if, since I know that the sentence was wrong from the beginning, does this change the truth value? In all of these examples, there is true value initially by the hearer simply because all items exist and therefore they assume the information is correct. Only if known knowledge (like if the table cannot hold books or if the hearer recently checked the table) would the truth value be in question. The other problem arises in my example, is if I were to walk the cat would this be wrong since I knew my parents meant dog contextually, although, technically I did exactly as they asked.



Re: Referential vs. Attributive Definite Descriptions - Ingrid Lee (irl13) 2019-03-13 20:07:43.0

Hi Rebekah! I loved how you used your own life examples and applied to last week's lesson. I can definitely relate. If I was leaving in a rush and I tell my brother to bring me my keys on the dining room table, they will look at just the dining room table. It is just like Strawson's analysis of having no truth value. There are about 4 tables in that area and my brother likes to be annoying. He would continue coming back to me without my keys until I name the correct table my keys were on. This allows there to be a truth value but this also causes me to be late.



Re: Referential vs. Attributive Definite Descriptions - Laila Olivera (llo20) 2019-03-13

20:12:01.0

Hi Rebekah,

Your post reminded me of how my sister always says "Give me the **brush in the drawer**" and just like you said Donnellan says that if this is used referentially then it wouldn't be a false utterance if the brush wasn't in the place that it belonged. Instead the brush could be in her room or on top of the sink. I was still trying to figure out a way to contrast the referential within this utterance just like the example of the table being an antique table. Does anyone have a good way of contrasting the referential because I was a bit confused on how to apply his analysis to this utterance?