Conditionalizing referential uses of definite descriptions

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Since at least Donnellan 1966 it is well-known that utterances containing definite descriptions can make true claims, even if the description itself fails to denote, as illustrated in (1). Two types of analyses have been proposed for this problem: those assuming systematically ambiguous DPs (including Donnellan), and those appealing to pragmatics. In this talk I provide novel empirical evidence for a Donnellan type approach. I show that *if*-clauses can originate inside DPs with a referential reading (but not with an attributive reading), often expressing epistemic uncertainty about the adequacy of the description. Consider the example in (2). I propose that the *if*-clause in such constructions restricts an epistemic necessity operator that is only present in referential uses of the definition description. For concreteness' sake, I will adapt a formalization that Heim 2011 gives of Stalnaker 1970's proposal for referential uses of definite descriptions, and propose the analysis in (3).

(1)   A (pointing to a man in the room): Alex's spouse is having a good time.
        B: Yes, you are right, but they are not married.

(2)   Alex's spouse, if they (ever) got married, just walked into my store.

(3) $[\![the_{ref}\alpha, if\ p]\!] = \iota x\ [\forall w' \in Best(\bigcap f(w) \cup [\![p]\!]):\ \alpha(x)\ in\ w']$

(3) denotes a unique individual x, and it presupposes that in the best of the speaker's epistemically accessible worlds *where p holds*, x is one of the αs. This correctly predicts that only epistemic readings of the modal are possible, and that counterfactual uses are out.

References: ● Donnellan, K. 1966. 'Reference and Definite Descriptions.' *The Philosophical Review.* ● Heim, I. 2011. 'Definiteness and Indefiniteness.' In: Maienborn, von Heusinger and Portner: *HSK 33.2.* ● Kripke, S. 1977. 'Speaker's reference and semantic reference.' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy.* ● Recanati, F. 2014. 'Referene through Mental Files: Indexicals and Definite Descriptions.' In: Penco and Domaneschi: *What Is Said and What Is Not.* ● Stalnaker, R. 1970. 'Pragmatics.' *Synthese.*