CHAPTER 1

CHARACTERIZING REFERENTIAL COMMUNICATION

The present chapter attempts to provide a more detailed characterization of referring acts. In the first section I will expand further on the intuitive characterization of referring acts in terms of intentions to refer an audience to particular things one has in mind. Although this characterization allows us to draw certain important distinctions, as it stands it is quite imprecise since it rests on the vague notion of "having a thing in mind".

The question is whether some more explanatory characterization of referring acts can be given. In this regard the role of two important notions will be explored; first that of reference and then that of a referring expression. For it seems not implausible to think that referring acts always involve reference to some objects, and further that they are necessarily performed by referring expressions. Yet what the discussion will show is that neither of these assumptions holds true. Agents can perform referring acts without actually referring to some objects, at least given the standard conception of "an object of reference". And secondly, they can perform referring acts without actually using what has commonly been considered as a referring expression. Nevertheless, in the course of arriving at these rather negative results several important distinctions will be introduced which will yield some better understanding of referring acts.

Most importantly these are the distinction between different forms of reference, namely between mental reference and reference involving uses of linguistic expressions; further the distinction between semantic and pragmatic aspects of language and here in particular the distinction between the meaning of linguistic expressions, their conventional referents and their intended referents relative to contexts of their use; further the distinction between reference to real world entities and reference to fictional or unreal entities, and the related distinction between fictional discourse and real world discourse; and finally the distinction between different kinds of referring expressions and their different functions, in particular the
distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions. Although these distinctions are mainly introduced with the aim of characterizing the phenomenon of referential communication, their relevance for the central question of success in referential communication will also be discussed.

1. AN INTUITIVE CHARACTERIZATION OF REFERENTIAL COMMUNICATION

As part of making statements, asking questions or performing other illocutionary acts we frequently use expressions to "refer" or "relate" an audience to particular objects or collections of objects that we have in mind. Consider the following examples in which I am using the underlined expressions in such a way:

(1) Plato wrote many dialogues.
(2) The current president of the US plays the saxophone!

In (1) I am using the proper name 'Plato' with the intention to refer the reader to a particular ancient Greek philosopher I have in mind, and in (2) I use the definite description to refer the reader to Bill Clinton. Searle (1969) has called uses of the underlined expressions as they occur in (1) or (2) speech acts of referring. Throughout this work I will simply call them referring acts, or alternatively I will speak of cases of referential communication. In this section I will state some features which strike one intuitively as characteristic of such acts.

(a) Referring acts are a special sort of communicative acts. By this I mean that they are performed with a distinctive communicative goal or intention. Intuitively speaking, the goal or intention which underlies a speaker's referring act is to refer the audience by the use of an expression to a certain object or entity which the speaker has in mind. Following Bach (1987) one can refer to this underlying goal or intention of the speaker as his referential intention. Now, speakers can perform referring acts which different kinds of referential intentions. First, one can distinguish between referring acts by which they intend to relate an audience to a particular, that is to an entity like you or me which instantiates certain properties or relations, and those acts where they intend to relate them to a universal, that is to an entity which can be instantiated by a particular, like the property being male. I take it that

---

1 This latter term is borrowed from Evans (1982). Although I think that his use of the term roughly corresponds to the use I make of the term here, there are some differences which will be pointed out in later chapters.