For: *The Encyclopedia of the Mind*. Hal Pashler, ed. Editorial Board Members: Tim Crane,

Fernanda Ferreira, Marcel Kinsbourne, Rich Zemel.

Descriptions

Berit Brogaard

Australian National University/Missouri

August 14, 2008

Descriptions are phrases of the form 'an F', 'the F', 'Fs' and 'the Fs'. They can be indefinite

(e.g., 'an F' and 'Fs'), definite (e.g. 'the F' and 'the Fs'), singular (e.g., 'an F', 'the F') or plural

(e.g., 'the Fs', 'Fs'). In English plural indefinite descriptions lack an article and are for that

reason also known as 'bare plurals'.

Most of the philosophical literature on descriptions has dealt with singular descriptions

and has followed Bertrand Russell in treating these phrases on a par with quantified noun phrases

such as 'some F' and 'every F'. In the early 1900 descriptions were commonly treated as special

kinds of proper names. In his well-known book *Principles of Mathematics* (not to be confused

with *Principia Mathematica*, which Russell later co-authored with Alfred Whitehead), Russell

suggested that unlike genuinely proper names (e.g. 'Bertrand Russell'), which denote their

referents directly, descriptions are to be treated as so-called denoting phrases. Denoting phrases

denote their denotation by way of a denoting concept indicated by the phrase.

In his seminal work "On Denoting", which was published in *Mind* in 1905, Russell

completely changed this picture of descriptions. Russell here argues that there are no denoting

concepts, that is, there are no phrases which denote their denotation indirectly via a denoting

concept. Description sentences are to be interpreted as different sentences in which no denoting

phrase occurs: 'The teacher of Plato is wise', for example, is to be interpreted as '$\exists x(x$ is a

teacher of Plato & (∀y (y is a teacher of Plato → $y = x$) & x is wise)'. Or in English: 'there is a unique teacher of Plato, and he is wise'. Consequently, even though the description sentence 'the teacher of Plato is wise' is grammatically a subject-predicate sentence, it is not logically a subject-predicate sentence, because it translates into a kind of existential sentence, in which the apparent denoting phrase 'the teacher of Plato' does not occur. On Russell's new view, ordinary language simply obscures the true logical form of the propositions it expresses. The translations replace ordinary language with a logically perfect language that truly reflects the logical form of sentences. For Russell, descriptions are thus incomplete symbols which have no meaning in themselves; they can be defined only via a contextual definition and not directly.

Though Russell's new theory of descriptions has become something of a paradigm of analytic philosophy, it has been challenged on a number of occasions. In "On Referring" Peter Strawson offered reasons for treating definite descriptions as referring expressions. His main charge against Russell was that Russell incorporates aspects of what a description sentence presupposes into what it says. Intuitively, when the presupposition fails, we have a misfire, not, as Russell would have it, a falsehood.[1] For example, 'the king of France is bald' mistakenly presupposes that France is a monarchy, and so an utterance of this sentence has no truth-value. As further evidence against Russell, Strawson points out that most definite descriptions are incomplete and thus do not have to be uniquely satisfied. 'The book is on the table' is a perfectly felicitous sentence in many contexts. But in the actual world it is not true that there is exactly one book on exactly one table, as Russell theory would predict.

Many attempts have been made to save Russell's theory from Strawson's objection. A response to Strawson's charge that Russell confuses what is presupposed by an uttered sentence with what is said can be found, for instance, in Stephen Neale's book-length treatment of the topic. In recent years the problem of incomplete descriptions has been dealt with, for instance, by appealing to a phenomenon known as 'quantifier domain restriction'. If I were to say that every

---

[1] Special thanks here to Gary Ostertag.

bottle is on the table, I would not ordinarily mean that every bottle in the universe is on the table. As Jason Stanley and Zoltán Szabó, among others, have argued, what I would be saying in the envisaged circumstance is that every <bottle, i> is on the table, where 'i' signifies some appropriate location, for instance, the kitchen. The problem of incomplete descriptions can be dealt with in the same way. 'The book is on the table' can be treated as being of the form 'the <book, i> is on the <table, j>', where 'i' and 'j' signify, say, appropriate locations. The same approach can also be extended to account for descriptions which are bound by an operator occurring elsewhere in the sentence. 'In most of his classes, John fails the girl with green eyes and blond hair' can be treated as being of the form 'in most of his classes, John fails the <girl with green eyes and blond hair, f(i)>', where 'i' is a variable bound by the higher quantifier 'most classes', and the value of 'f' is a function provided by context that maps objects onto quantifier domains. For example, context might supply 'f' with a function that takes classes and yields the set of students in the class in question.

Another legendary charge against Russell originated in Keith Donnellan's "Reference and Definite Descriptions". Donnellan here points out that we often use definite descriptions in two distinct ways. According to Donnellan, a description may be used attributively to pick out the object (if any) that uniquely satisfies the description. But it may also be used referentially to refer to the object the speaker has in mind and it may be so used even if the object does not satisfy the relevant description. Donnellan thinks that Russell's theory is countered by these observations, because Russell's theory ignores the referential use. In one of Donnellan's examples, Jones has been charged with Smith's murder and has been placed on trial. There has been some discussion of Jones's odd behavior at his trial. According to Donnellan, if we express our feelings about his behavior by saying 'Smith's murderer is insane', we might well have said something true of Jones, even if it should turn out that Smith committed suicide. But if it turns out that Smith committed suicide, Russell's theory will predict that we said something false. So, according to Donnellan, Russell's theory is incorrect.

Saul Kripke, Stephen Neale, Peter Ludlow, among others, have since then offered extensive criticism of Donnellan's theory (and close variants). According to Kripke, the occurrence of referential uses of definite descriptions among English speakers does not disprove that the Russellian analysis is correct for English. Kripke tells us that even in a language stipulated to abide by the Russellian analysis, the Donnellan phenomenon would arise. In fact, Kripke says, methodological considerations militate against Donnellan's ambiguity thesis. By appealing to pragmatic principles the Russellian can explain the phenomena associated with referential uses without positing a semantic ambiguity. Donnellan's ambiguity thesis and the pragmatically enriched Russellian account thus accommodate the same phenomena overall, even if they accommodate different phenomena at the semantic level. In addition, the pragmatically enriched Russellian account appeals to pragmatic principles we at any rate have to posit in order to accommodate our intuitions about various other expressions. Kripke concludes, based on this and other reasons, that the pragmatically enriched Russellian account is preferable to Donnellan's ambiguity thesis.

Stephen Neale, Michael Devitt and others have later suggested that Donnellan and his critics might both be right. Suppose, for example, that I say (intending to communicate a proposition about a person in my visual field) 'The guy is drunk'. According to Neale, it is plausible to think that what I have said is equivalent to '[the x: guy x & $x = $ a](x is drunk)', where 'a' is a name of the relevant person. Neale thinks the idea underlying this approach to the problem of incomplete descriptions generalizes quite widely. He suggests that whenever a description is used referentially it is being used in such a way that there is an obvious completion (whether or not the description actually needs one or not). For example, if I say (intending to communicate a proposition about Jones) 'Smith's murderer is insane', then it is plausible to think that what I have said is equivalent to '[the x: murderer of Smith x & $x = $ Jones](x is insane)'.

In recent years further challenges have been directed against Russell's original theory. In "Descriptions as Predicates" Delia Fara argues that descriptions should not be treated as

quantified noun phrases, but rather as complex predicate expressions. On Fara's view, the description 'the greatest French soldier' as it occurs in 'Washington is the greatest French soldier' is to be interpreted as having a predicate-type semantic value, which Fara takes to be the set of entities the predicate is true of. Fara offers two reasons for thinking that descriptions aren't quantifiers at the level of logical form. One reason is that ordinary quantifiers, unlike descriptions, do not occur in predicate position (compare '#Sam and Lisa are not few students').

A second reason for thinking that predicative descriptions are better treated as predicates is this: descriptions do not seem to give rise to the sorts of scope ambiguities that they would give rise to if they were quantifiers. Quantifiers may, familiarly, take wide as well as narrow scope with respect to other operators, as in

(1)   John didn't talk to some philosopher

On the narrow-scope reading, (1) says that it is not the case that there is some philosopher which John talked to, hence that John didn't talk to any philosopher; on the wide-scope reading, it says that there is some philosopher which John didn't talk to. But consider now a sentence with a description in predicative position, for instance

(2)   John is not a philosopher.

Russell's theory predicts that (2) should have a reading according to which there is a philosopher that is not identical to John. But this is not a possible interpretation of (2), which can only mean that John is not identical to any philosopher. Indefinite descriptions in predicative position thus seem to be narrow-scope takers. Prima facie, this is odd if they are quantifiers.

Fara's main argument against Russell's analysis of descriptions in argument position turns on the apparent variable quantificational force of descriptions. Consider, for instance:

5

(3)   An owner of a Porsche is usually smug.

(4)   The owner of a Porsche is usually smug.

(3) can, of course, be read as saying that some owner of a Porsche is smug most of the time. Likewise, (4) can be read as saying that a unique owner of a Porsche is smug most of the time. But (3) and (4) can also both be read as saying that Porsche owners, in general, are smug most of the time, or that most Porsche owners are smug. According to Fara, sentences like (3) and (4) present an insuperable problem for Russell's theory. For on Russell's theory, descriptions do not receive generic force. The only option left for the Russellian is to posit an unwelcome ambiguity in the definite and indefinite articles of descriptions. Or so the argument goes. On Fara's proposal, the definite and indefinite articles are supposedly not ambiguous. For expressions with predicate-type semantic values cannot occur in an argument position at the level of logical form, since the logical forms would be uninterpretable. Fara proposes that descriptions in argument position are preceded by determiners which are contributed by the sentence structure rather than by any of the expressions in the sentence. Fara's predicative analysis thus predicts that (3) and (4) are ambiguous. But because the definite description contributes the same constituent on all readings, the definite article is not ambiguous.

There have been other recent challenges to Russell's original theory. Szabó, Gabriel Segal and Ludlow have argued that Russell's theory to the effect that definite descriptions carry a semantic uniqueness implication is mistaken. According to them, the sentence 'the book is on the table' does not semantically imply that there is a unique book on a unique table; it merely conventionally or conversationally implicates it. One reason for questioning the uniqueness assumption is that there are many cases in which definite descriptions do not carry a uniqueness implication. Szabó offers the following example:

(5)   A man entered the room with five others. The man took off his hat and gave it to one of the others.

We can imagine this sequence of sentences to be true. But under Russell's treatment, (5) is contradictory. Of course, contemporary Russellians may try to avoid this problem by insisting that context furnish an adequate delimitation of the domain of discourse or an adequate completion of the description. However, Szabó thinks this approach is doubtful in cases where the speaker has no particular individual in mind. As he points out, if Sherlock Holmes deduces (5) from general clues, he may not know enough to pick out any one of the relevant men. Nonetheless, in uttering (5) he could be saying something true.

Most of the philosophical literature is concerned with singular definite descriptions. Plural definite descriptions present independent problems. On a Russellian account of plural definite descriptions, sentences of the form 'the Fs are G' imply that every one of the Fs satisfies a singular form of the plural predicate G in distributive environments. Russellians thus fail to account for the difference in truth-conditions between the following two sentences:

(6)   The students asked questions

(7)   Every one of the students asked questions

Berit Brogaard has argued that plural definite descriptions are best treated as having the semantic import of partitive constructions of the form 'some of the Fs', 'all of the Fs', 'none of the Fs', etc. Partitives tell us how many of the Fs collectively satisfy the complement if the complement is non-distributive, or how many individually satisfy the complement if the complement is distributive. For example, 'every one of the students' as it occurs in (7) tells us that every one of the students satisfies the singular predicate 'is an x such that x asked a question'. In the case of partitives, the force of the quantifier in the predicate is determined by the syntax. That is, the

quantifier is present at the level of logical form. In the case of non-partitive plural definite descriptions in environments like (6), on the other hand, the force of the quantifier is determined by the speaker's knowledge of the lexical nature of the predicate. Following Greg Carlson, knowledge of the lexical nature of the predicate requires knowledge of the general background assumptions concerning the situations in which we are to consider the truth or falsity of the sentence in which it occurs. In the case of (6), for example, knowledge of the lexical nature of the predicate will determine that the students satisfy the plural predicate 'are some Xs such that the Xs asked questions' just in case some of them satisfy the singular predicate 'is an x such that x asked a question'.

A further criticism of Russell's theory is that it is not a fully general theory of descriptions, because it cannot be extrapolated to account for generic uses of descriptions, as in:

(8)   The dinosaur is extinct.

Richard Sharvy, Fara, Brogaard and others have argued, it is plausible that common nouns like 'dinosaur' or 'bear' can vary in their interpretation, sometimes serving as predicates true of individual animals, while at other times serving as predicates true of subspecies or larger taxa, as in 'there are two bears in Alaska: the black bear and the grizzly' or 'the crustaceans evolved simultaneously'. 'The dinosaur', in one of its senses, might then denote a totality or fusion of dinosaurs. However, there are lots of problems with this sort of account. Consider:

(9)   The tiger is striped

(10)   The Chrysler is sold on the West Coast.

(9) doesn't make a claim about the entire tiger species. Rather, it makes a claim about individual tigers. Likewise, (10) doesn't say that the totality of the world's Chryslers is sold on the West Coast. On one reading, (10) says that Chryslers, in general, are sold on the West Coast. On another, which is actually preferred, it says that some Chryslers are sold on the West Coast. Further problems: Many sentences containing definite generics do not seem to be about groups or totalities at all. Consider (from Carlson):

(11)   The president makes good decisions when he is from Ohio.

(12)   The president has eaten at the Statler Hilton on Saturday nights every week for the past 25 years.

(13)   The president inhabited the White House continuously for 136 years until Truman moved into Blair house.

(14)   Five times since the turn of the century, the president has been assassinated by a disgruntled job-seeker.

The analysis offered above predicts that the above sentences make claims about the fusion of the American presidents. (13), for example, is supposedly asserting that a four-dimensional space-time worm to which the predicate 'president' applies lived in the White House for 136 years until one of its temporal parts moved into Blair house, and (14) is supposedly asserting that a four-dimensional space-time worm to which the predicate 'president' applies has been killed five times. Just as 'dinosaur' applies to the fusion of all dinosaurs, 'president' applies to the fusion of the American presidents. So, this fusion is itself a president. This is strange. Of course, metaphysically speaking, the totality of the world's presidents is not very different from the totality of the world's dinosaurs. But natural language treats them differently. There are

predicates that apply directly to the fusion of dinosaurs, as compared to parts of the fusion. The predicate 'is-extinct', for example, expresses a property of the fusion of dinosaurs directly. This property does not distribute over individual dinosaurs: it is the totality of the world's dinosaurs that is extinct, not the individual animals. But there are no predicates that apply directly to the fusion of the American presidents (e.g. 'the president came into existence on April 30, 1789' and 'the president is in danger of extinction' are odd). If predicates are indeed attributed to the fusion of the American presidents, they are attributed only in virtue of being predicated of individual American presidents. This difference seems to tell against a uniform interpretation of definite generic descriptions.[2]

Relevant Readings

Bach, K. 2000. "Quantification, Qualification, and Context: A Reply to Stanley and Szabó," *Mind and Language* 15, 262-283.

Brogaard, B. 2007. "Descriptions: Predicates or Quantifiers?", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 85: 17-136.

Brogaard, B. 2007. "The But Not All: A Partitive Account of Plural Definite Descriptions," *Mind and Language* 22: 402-426.

Brogaard, B. 2007. "Sharvy's Theory of Definite Descriptions Revisited", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 88: 160-180.

Carlson, G. 1977. *Reference to Kinds in English*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Devitt, M. 2004. "The Case for Referential Descriptions", in *Descriptions: Semantic and Pragmatic Perspectives*, ed. M. Reimer and A. Bezuidenhout, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 280-305.

Donnellan, K. 1966. "Reference and Definite Descriptions", *Philosophical Review* 77: 281-304.

Fara, D. G. "Descriptions as Predicates", *Philosophical Studies* 102 (2001), 1-42. Originally published under the name "Delia Graff".

Fara D. G. 2006. "Descriptions with Adverbs of Quantification", *Philosophical Issues, 16, Philosophy of Language*, 65-87. Originally published under the name "Delia Graff".

Ludlow, P. 2004. Descriptions, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2004 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL=<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2004/entries/descriptions/>.

Ludlow, P., and S. Neale, (1991). "Indefinite Descriptions: In Defense of Russell," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 14: 171-202.

Kripke, S. 1977. "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 2: 255-76.

Ludlow, P. and G. Segal "On a Unitary Semantical Analysis for Definite and Indefinite Descriptions", in A. Bezuidenhout and M. Reimer (eds.) *Descriptions and Beyond*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 420-37.

Neale, S. *Descriptions*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990.

Neale, S. 2004. "This, That, and the Other", in M. Reimer and A. Bezuidenhout, ed., *Descriptions and Beyond*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 68-182.

Ostertag, G. 2002. "Descriptions and Logical Form", in *A Companion to Philosophical Logic*, ed. D. Jacquette, Oxford: Blackwell: 177-93.

Russell, B. 1905. "On Denoting", *Mind* 14: 479-493.

Russell, B. 1903. *The Principles of Mathematics*, New York: Norton.

Stanley, J. 2002. "Nominal Restriction", in G. Preyer and G. Peter (eds), *Logical Form and Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 365-88.

Stanley, J. and Z. Szabó. 2000. "On Quantifier Domain Restriction", *Mind and Language* 15: 219-61.

Strawson, P. F. 1950. "On Referring", *Mind* 59: 320-344.

Szabó, Z. 2000. "Descriptions and Uniqueness", *Philosophical Studies* 101: 29-57

Szabó, Z. 2003. "Definite Descriptions Without Uniqueness: A Reply to Abbott", *Philosophical Studies* 114: 279-291.

Szabó, Z. 2005. "The Loss of Uniqueness", *Mind* 114: 1185-1222.

Von Fintel, K. 2004. "Would you Believe It? The King of France is Back!", in M. Reimer and A. Bezuidenhout, ed., *Descriptions and Beyond*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 315-41.

Whitehead, A. N. and B. Russell. 1962. *Principia Mathematica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.