

Some issues involving definite and indefinite descriptions

PHIL 43916
September 12, 2012

1. Referential uses of definite descriptions.....	1
2. Incomplete descriptions.....	3
3. Generics.....	3

1. DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS

In giving our semantics for quantifier phrases in English, we treated phrases of the form ‘the Nc’ as quantifier phrases which combine with sentences. Our lexicon assigned them the following meaning:

$$\llbracket [\text{the } \beta]_i S \rrbracket^{M,g} = 1 \text{ iff for some } u \in U, \llbracket \beta \rrbracket^{M,g} = \{u\} \text{ and } \llbracket S \rrbracket^{M, g[u/e1]} = 1$$

This entails that a sentence of the form ‘The F is G’ is true if and only if there is exactly one thing which ‘is F’, and that thing ‘is G.’

(In this respect, it follows Bertrand Russell’s pioneering theory of descriptions, proposed in the first decade of the 20th century. I’ve put some of Russell’s early papers, as well as some of the others mentioned below, as extra readings on the course web site.)

It is one thing to understand how to compute truth conditions for ‘the’ sentences based on the above lexical entry. It is another to ask how well this lexical entry models the English word ‘the.’ Let’s pause a bit to consider the latter question and, in particular, to consider some uses of ‘the’ in English which don’t seem to fit our analysis very well.

1.1. *Referential uses of definite descriptions*

Suppose I see a very interesting looking man in the corner drinking a transparent beverage with an olive in it out of a shallow cone-shaped glass, and say to you:

The man in the corner drinking a martini is interesting.

As it turns out, he is interesting, but also rather eccentric in his tastes; he’s actually drinking water with an olive in it. Given this, what does my use of “the man in the corner

drinking a martini” refer to? What does it take for the above sentence to be true? (The example is due to Keith Donnellan.)

One might think that the answers to these questions are pretty clear: despite the fact that the man in the corner is not drinking a martini, I am still plainly talking about him; and hence my sentence is true iff *that man* is interesting.

On this view, there are some uses of definite descriptions — referential uses — which don’t work in quite the way that Russell’s theory says that they should. Other uses — attributive uses — might still work on the way that Russell’s theory says.

This is a view according to which ‘the’ is systematically ambiguous, in much the way that ‘bank’ is. Sometimes it has the referential meaning; at other times it has the attributive (Russellian) meaning. (This was (on one reading) the moral that Donnellan drew.)

Saul Kripke (in ‘Speaker’s reference and semantic reference’) raised some problems for this sort of view.

1. We get something like the distinction between referential and attributive uses even for names. (E.g. ‘Smith, get out of the way of that car!’ when Jones is the one in the way of the car.) But it’s implausible to react to this by saying that every name is multiply ambiguous. Rather, we should say that this is a case in which semantic reference and speaker’s reference — i.e., the semantic value of the expression vs. the thing a speaker happens to be using the expression to talk about — come apart. But then why not say the same about Donnellan’s cases?

2. Kripke argues that, if Russell’s theory of definite descriptions were correct for some language L, we would still expect observation of speakers of L to indicate that some of their uses are referential (in the sense that the speaker’s reference of a description ‘the F’ is sometimes something which is not F). Consider a language in which the definite article is banned from the language, rather than uttering sentences involving ‘the’, speakers must utter sentences like ‘There is a unique man in the corner drinking a martini, and every man in the corner drinking a martini is interesting.’ Would we get referential uses in these three languages? It seems that we would. If so, then the fact that we get referential uses in English does not seem to cut against Russell’s analysis of the meaning of definite descriptions.

Kripke’s conclusion:

“Under these circumstances, surely general methodological principles favor the existing account. The apparatus of speaker’s reference and semantic reference ...is needed anyway to explain the Smith-Jones case; it is applicable to all languages.

Why posit a semantic ambiguity when it is both insufficient in general and superfluous for the special case it seeks to explain? ...

It is very much the lazy man's approach to philosophy to posit ambiguities when in trouble. If we face a putative counterexample to our favorite philosophical thesis, it is always open to us to protest that some key term is being used in a special sense, different from its use in the thesis. We may be right, but the ease of the move should counsel a policy of caution: Do not posit an ambiguity unless you are really forced to, unless there are really compelling theoretical or intuitive grounds to suppose that an ambiguity really is present." (243)

1.2. *Incomplete descriptions*

Consider what Russell's view says about the truth conditions for:

The book is on the table.

Can this sentence be true even if there is more than one book in existence? How might you modify Russell's theory to avoid these problematic consequences for our uses of incomplete descriptions?

One might argue that this is no problem for Russell, since, in general, similar things arise for all quantifier expressions, as in

All the beer has been drank.

No one is here.

This phenomenon is called 'quantifier domain restriction.' How, roughly, might you model quantifier domain restriction using the sort of semantic theory we have been developing?

There are problem cases for the idea that incomplete descriptions can be, in general, handled by quantifier domain restriction. Consider (borrowing an example from Peter Ludlow)

Put the book on the book.

In what circumstances would this make sense? Do they pose a problem for the attempt to treat incomplete descriptions as cases of quantifier domain restriction?

1.3. *Generics*

Consider now the sentence

The whale is a mammal.

How could Russell's theory be applied to this sentence? On the most obvious application, it makes this sentence entail that there is exactly one whale and it is mammalian. But even if we have a satisfactory general story about incomplete descriptions, this seems to get the truth conditions of the sentence radically wrong.

An alternative would be to say that here 'the whale' really means something like 'the kind, whale'. But this can't be quite right, since the kind is not itself a mammal.

So it might well look like that we do have a genuine ambiguity in 'the' here; sometimes 'The F is G' means roughly what 'Fs are Gs' means. So 'The whale is a mammal' means the same thing as

Whales are mammals.

This is called a *generic* use of 'the whale'/'whales.' These raise puzzles of their own. You might think that they simply mean the same as

All F's are G.

Which fits the above example, but not cases like

Dogs have four legs.

which are true despite the existence of three-legged dogs. This might lead you to suggest instead that these sentences should be interpreted as, roughly,

Most F's are G

But this leads to trouble too, since it mistakenly counts

Books are paperbacks.

as true, and

Mosquitoes carry the West Nile Virus.

as false. (The examples are from Leslie, "Generics.") We'll return to the puzzles raised by generics later in the course.

2. INDEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS

Consider the sentence:

Titanic is not a good movie.

What truth conditions would (an extension of) F_2 assign to this sentence?

Does this sentence mean (in English) that there is a good movie to which *Titanic* is not identical?

This sort of case suggests that, at least when they occur as part of VPs, indefinite descriptions are not functioning in a way analogous to existential quantification in the predicate calculus. Rather, 'is a good book' seems to be simply functioning like a (complex) intransitive verb. If this is right, then either (i) phrases of the form 'a F' are ambiguous in English or (ii) our account of the meaning of phrases of this sort is incorrect.