

The referential use of definite descriptions*

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I

RUSSELL'S THEORY OF descriptions has been criticized by many authors on the grounds that it is unable to account for the referential uses of these expressions.¹ Russell's theory stipulates that, strictly speaking, descriptions do not name anything when fully analyzed in logical form. Logical analysis reveals that they are merely incomplete symbols and that they should be contextually eliminated in terms of existential clauses. So it appears that they cannot really function as singular terms. But it has been pointed out that we do sometimes use definite descriptions as singular terms. This "phenomenological" evidence suggests that Russell's theory must be seriously amended unless we succeed in showing that the evidence in question is compatible with it. This is precisely what I intend to do. I would like to formulate a definition for referential uses which is compatible with Russell's theory. My objective is to show that we could accept Russell's idea that definite descriptions are incomplete symbols while allowing for the possibility of referential uses. This can be claimed coherently as long as referential uses are understood as non-literal speech acts and therefore constitute essentially a pragmatic phenomenon, while Russell's theory is adequate when considered strictly from a semantic point of view.

II

Consider the following definition for a referential use of the definite description "the teacher of Plato" performed by John in uttering "the teacher of Plato is mortal":

* This essay is the revised version of the paper given at the conference.

¹ P.F. Strawson, "On Referring", *Mind*, 59 (1950); P.F. Strawson, "Identifying Reference and Truth Values", *Theoria*, 30 (1964); reprinted in D. Steinberg and L. Jacobovits, eds., *Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1971); K.S. Donnellan, "Reference and Definite Description", *Philosophical Review*, 75 (1966); reprinted in A.P. Martinich, ed., *The Philosophy of Language* (London: Oxford U. P., 1985).

- (a) John says that $(\exists x)[(x \text{ is teacher of Plato}) \cdot (y)(y \text{ is teacher of Plato in } C \equiv y = x) \cdot (x \text{ is mortal})]$
- (b) $(\exists z)[(z \text{ is teacher of Plato}) \cdot (w)(w \text{ is teacher of Plato in } C \equiv w = z) \cdot (\text{John says that } z \text{ is mortal})]$
- (c) John believes that $(\exists u)[(u \text{ is teacher of Plato}) \cdot (v) (v \text{ is teacher of Plato in } C \equiv v = u) \cdot (\Box v = u) \cdot (\text{John says } u \text{ is mortal})]$
- (d) John *M*-intends the hearer to recognize (c)
- (e) The hearer recognizes what is *M*-intended by John.

The first condition is what I call the *Russellian condition*. If Russell is right, a small scope (secondary) occurrence of the description should be eliminated as indicated in (a). The only notable difference concerns the uniqueness formula that appears as the second conjunct in the subordinate clause. It is only a minor adjustment introduced in order to account for the fact that uniqueness is partially ensured by the context. The key idea behind this first condition is to read the locutionary verb “says” in what I call a “material” sense, as opposed to an “intentional” sense. When we are reporting what an agent says in a material sense, we are describing what the agent is *in fact* saying and not necessarily what he represents himself as saying. An intentional reading of the locutionary verb, by contrast, will be precisely a description of the content that matches with what the agent represents himself as saying.² The distinction between the material and intentional readings of locutionary verbs and propositional attitudes in general is crucial to my account. It coincides with a distinction between extensional and intensional readings. I claim that there are numerous instances in which we find ourselves ascribing a content to an agent that transcends his cognitive capacities. We then put the agent’s attitudes in relation with a content that he in fact believes, desires, intends, etc. In those circumstances, there is no reason not to read the attitudinal verbs extensionally. This point is not often made in the literature, but I believe it reflects faithfully our linguistic practices.

If the locutionary verb is read in a material sense in (a), Russell’s claim becomes compatible with the fact that John does not represent himself as asserting a general formula. It does seem then compatible with the fact that John represents himself as saying something *about* the teacher of Plato.

The second condition in the definition is the *Success condition*. If a referential use of the description is successful, then there has to be a unique individual that taught Plato and about whom John is in fact saying that he is mortal. In other words, condition (b) stipulates that a necessary condition for a referential use is that the object must exist. For those who are willing to admit non-existent objects in their ontology, we could characterize condition (b) as requiring at least the subsistence of the object.

Condition (c) embodies three particular conditions that I call the *Existence*, *Uniqueness*, and *Determinacy conditions*. They represent three things that must be presupposed by John in order to achieve singular reference with the description. Here, by “presuppositions”, I mean things that are believed by the agent in his act

of saying. This is why the three clauses occur outside the scope of the locutionary operator but inside the scope of the belief operator. John represents himself as saying something about an object that is a unique and determinate teacher of Plato. Since the whole condition shows John having a certain representation of his act of saying, the act is intentional in the previously discussed sense. Condition (a) featured a material use of the locutionary verb and made it possible to argue that it could be satisfied even if John does not intentionally assert a Russellian formula. Now that we have come to consider what John is intentionally asserting, we see that it is something *about* a unique and determinate teacher of Plato. The three clauses have an intermediary occurrence and, therefore, are not part of the content of John’s intentional act of saying. That is, they do not form a part of what John represents himself as saying. Again, Russell’s theory is shown to be compatible with the fact that the agent is not intentionally asserting a Russellian formula.

I submit that existential, uniqueness, and determinacy conditions are necessary conditions that govern the successful performance of any singular referring use, whether the expression involved is a name, an indexical or a description. The first two are, according to Russell, part of the literal meaning of any sentence containing a definite description, as long as by “meaning” one understands here “content” and not “linguistic meaning”. The third one is not literally contained in the sentence and ensures that the identity of the object be fixed “in all possible worlds”. We could say that it is a “rigidity” condition as long as it is understood as reference in all the possible worlds in which the object exists.

Even if the first two presuppositions reflect what belongs to the literal content of the sentence, all three belong to what is being non-literally meant by the speaker. They are all additional to what he literally expresses because he does not need to have them in order to be speaking literally. The first two presuppositions reflect at the level of pragmatics the information contained in the sentence but they are still not needed. After all, the speaker could have used the description attributively, in Donnellan’s sense, in which case he would have asserted intentionally the existence and uniqueness clauses. This is why they share the property of all pragmatic presuppositions: they are cancellable.

Before going on, let me say a few words about the determinacy condition, as I call it. It is represented by the modal conjunct of the whole formula in (c). It is very important to understand this clause as world-indexed. It does not involve a reference to determinate entities because world-indexed variables refer to objects in an indeterminate way. The modal statement does not semantically presuppose determinacy but merely asserts it. This point needs emphasizing because it could be tempting to claim that externally quantified variables occurring in modal and epistemic contexts do behave as singular terms. It would then turn out that we are in fact presupposing in these formulas the very notion we are trying to define. As far as the determinacy condition is concerned however, it is not semantically presupposed simply because the variables are world-indexed. For the same reason, externally quantified variables in a modal context do not refer rigidly to individuals through all possible worlds.

The same remarks could be made concerning the uniqueness condition. Externally quantified variables occurring in an epistemic context are sometimes said to

² For a clarification of the distinction between the material and intentional uses of attitudinal verbs, see my “A Linguistic Theory of Intentionality”, *Cahiers d’épistémologie*, no. 8809 (Université du Québec à Montréal, 1988).

be “vivid” and to presuppose epistemic intimacy.³ This suggests that a uniqueness condition is presupposed semantically and we again run the risk of presupposing the notion we want to define if the variables behave according to our threefold criterion for singular reference. But I have introduced the notion of a material attribution and it could be argued that intentional notions can be defined in terms of material notions only. If so, we would need only material notions in our definitions, including condition (c). The intentionality of the locutionary verb in (c) does not rest on a special interpretation we have for a particular occurrence of it but rather upon the fact that an ordinary material occurrence of it appears under the scope of a belief operator. This is enough to obtain an intentional act of saying.⁴ And if all occurrences of psychological and locutionary verbs are material, it is no longer true to say that an externally quantified variable occurring within the scope of such a verb is “vivid”. By definition, a material attribution can transcend the agent’s cognitive capacities and, therefore, relates the agent to the object his act of saying is in fact about. As far as the first condition is concerned, variables will not satisfy semantically the existence condition if they always occur as bound variables, and so, if opened sentences cannot be asserted in isolation.

In short, I claim that if variables are world-indexed and never occur free, and if we are left in the final analysis only with material occurrences of psychological and locutionary verbs, there is no danger of implicitly reintroducing a semantic notion of singular reference while trying to define it as essentially pragmatic in nature. The formulas in our definition may contain externally quantified variables in the scope of modal and epistemic operators. The variables will not behave like singular terms because they do not semantically presuppose the existence, uniqueness and determinacy conditions.

Conditions (d) and (e) are what I call the *Gricean* and the *Uptake* conditions. A speaker who utters literally a sentence containing a definite description does not perform a referential use with the description. But under appropriate circumstances, he could refer singularly to an object in accordance with the literal meaning of the sentence as long as his intentional act of saying involves existential, uniqueness and determinacy presuppositions. These three presuppositions will be meant by the speaker only if he intends the hearer to recognize what he is presupposing. The hearer must also recognize that the speaker has those presuppositions. Therefore, we need the Gricean concept of *M*-intention.⁵ The speaker must intend the hearer to recognize what he is presupposing and must also intend the hearer to recognize that he has such an intention of recognition. Finally, he must also intend that part of the hearer’s reasons for believing that the speaker has those presuppositions is the speaker’s intention of recognition. We can abbreviate this threefold intention as the speaker’s *M*-intention that the hearer recognizes (c). This new condition is condition (d) and is the *Gricean condition*.

The hearer must then recognize the three presuppositions made by the speaker. That is, he must know that the speaker believes the existence, uniqueness and determinacy clauses. He must also recognize the speaker’s intention of recognition and this intention must be part of his reasons for believing the speaker has those presuppositions. We can abbreviate this condition by saying that the hearer must recognize what is *M*-intended by the speaker, and this is the *Uptake condition*.

No further conditions are required. In particular, it is not necessary for the hearer to believe that there is in fact a unique individual about whom the speaker says something. He could think that there is no such person as the teacher of Plato but this would not prevent John from using the description referentially as long as there is in fact such an individual.

We slightly depart from Grice in our definition also because we are not attempting a partly causal account of speaker’s meaning. The connection between the speaker’s intentions and the hearer’s recognitions is not causal but logical. The hearer’s recognition is described in such a way that corresponds exactly to the content of the speaker’s intentions.

Another important difference with Grice is that we obviously do not want to reduce sentence meaning to speaker’s meaning. It is not our purpose to avoid semantical relations in our definition. We use the Gricean concept of *M*-intention only as a tool in pure pragmatics and not in the course of an attempt to dissolve the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. Our intention is not to contribute to the Gricean program as a whole, as Schwarz does for example,⁶ but rather simply to investigate certain pragmatic phenomena that are additional to the semantic realm. This is why, for example, I have been concerned to introduce condition (b) in which it is stipulated that the individual must satisfy the content of the description. If the referential use is to be made in accordance with the literal meaning of the sentence, the referent must be a unique teacher of Plato. We are not excluding the possibility of performing referential uses in which the individual referred to does not exemplify the properties specified by the description. This is Donnellan’s notion. I simply want to claim however that we can only make sense of such cases by relying on implicit descriptions that the speaker has in mind and that *are* satisfied by the referent.

It is perhaps worthwhile warning the reader against an apparent difficulty that does not really threaten my definition. It could be claimed that since Russell’s account entails that the meaning of a sentence containing a definite description is given by a general sentence, it is going to be hard to account for the utterance of such a sentence performed by a *semantically competent speaker* without describing him as *intentionally* asserting a general sentence. Surely, a semantically competent speaker must represent himself as saying what he is in fact saying. If he is asserting a Russellian formula, he must represent himself as asserting a Russellian formula. Here the mistake is to confuse linguistic meaning and content. A semantically competent speaker must only master the linguistic meaning of the sentences he is uttering and not necessarily their content. He must represent himself as related to the sentence’s linguistic meaning and not necessarily to the general formula that serves

³ W.V.O. Quine, “Intensions Revisited”, in P.A. French *et al.*, eds., *Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language* (Minneapolis: Minnesota U. P., 1979), pp. 268–74; reprinted in *Theories and Things* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 1981); the notion of vividness was first introduced by David Kaplan in “Quantifying in”, D. Davidson and G. Harman, eds., *Words and Objections* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969); reprinted in L. Linsky, ed., *Reference and Modality* (London: Oxford U. P., 1971).

⁴ Actually, it is not really enough; see “A Linguistic Theory of Intentionality” (fn. 1 above).

⁵ H.P. Grice, “Utterer’s Meaning and Intentions”, *Philosophical Review*, 78 (1969); reprinted in Martinich, ed., *The Philosophy of Language*: see p. 94.

⁶D. Schwarz, *Naming and Referring* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1979).

to specify its content. So the objection can be easily discarded since it is based upon a confusion between character and content.

III

Our definition enables us to account for the speaker's referring uses of descriptions while clearly using only the semantic resources of a Russellian language. It has, in my view, a great advantage over Strawson's own explanation. In his second paper on the subject, Strawson admits that there are cases where a Russellian account of definite descriptions is adequate.⁷ In other words, there are, according to Strawson, clear cases where John could be making an attributive use of the description in his utterance of the same sentence. This will be so if and only if:

- (a') John says that $(\exists x)[(x \text{ is teacher of Plato}) \cdot (y)(y \text{ is teacher of Plato in } C \equiv y = x) \cdot (x \text{ is mortal})]$
- (b') John believes that John says that $(\exists z)[(z \text{ is teacher of Plato}) \cdot (w)(w \text{ is teacher of Plato in } C \equiv w = z) \cdot (z \text{ is mortal})]$.

But Strawson wrongly thought that differences in use determine differences in logical form. He thought that a different logical syntax would be required to account for the referential and attributive uses of descriptions. In certain instances, they behave as singular terms and must be properly conceived as belonging to the category of singular terms. In other instances, they can be contextually eliminated in terms of an existential clause. I think I have shown that this point of view is wrong. I gave definitions for the referential and attributive uses of descriptions within a unitary theory.

Those who would like to defend Strawson's conclusion would have to argue that there are certain circumstances in which descriptions can be regimented in a Russellian way and other circumstances in which they must be construed as singular terms. The argument has the unfortunate disadvantage of making central an obscure and undefined notion of circumstance.

Strawson's so-called refutation is sometimes justified by a pseudo-Wittgensteinian rejection of the delimitation between semantics and pragmatics. In fact, it is based upon a genuinely anti-Wittgensteinian principle according to which there is a fact of the matter about meaning and understanding. This is shown by the naive confidence that these ordinary language philosophers entertain towards use as evidence for meaning. The fact is that no such evidence is available that can by itself suffice to confirm or falsify a semantic theory. My definitions show on the contrary that the phenomenological evidence against Russell can be accommodated within his theory. Moreover, it can be accommodated within a unitary theory.

The first analytic philosophers wrongly thought that there could be such a thing as a universal language that transcends times, communities and cultures. The late Wittgenstein clearly saw that such an idealization of language was illusory. But it should not be interpreted as announcing the dissolution of the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. The distinction is on the contrary an essential ingredient in the private language argument. Wittgenstein's philosophical views entail a sort

of relativism towards semantic theories in general, but not a rejection of semantic notions. Semantic theories can still provide the rules of the language game that a given community decides to play.

We must therefore not confuse semantic relativism with semantic nihilism. Semantic relativism urges us to uncover the goals and purposes behind the choice of a particular semantic theory. It should then be part of a Wittgensteinian approach to show that many incompatible theories can work out fine depending on our desiderata. Russell's theory should certainly be among them.

One of the essential points behind Wittgenstein's view of language is revealed by the plural in the word "language games". Actual uses of given speakers can hardly provide the evidence for *the* correct account of language in a way similar to what is supposed by ordinary language philosophers. Their anti-theoretic view prescribes that no unitary theory is possible but this is not Wittgenstein's point. It is rather that many unitary theories are possible. The choice is ultimately normative and not revealed in a transparent way by use.

My only hope is to have removed some of the reservations about the theory of descriptions and perhaps also to have generated doubts in the minds of those who think that it had been refuted by Strawson.

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⁷P.F. Strawson, "Identifying Reference and Truth Values", in *Semantics*, p. 96.