

# The ambiguity of definite descriptions

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HOW are the semantic referents, or denotations, of definite descriptions determined? One commonly held view is the view of Russell, that a definite description  $\lceil$ the  $\varphi$  $\rceil$  denotes an object  $x$ , just in case  $x$ , and  $x$  alone, satisfies the (perhaps complex) noun phrase  $\varphi$ .<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, it is a commonplace fact that expressions of the form  $\lceil$ the  $\varphi$  $\rceil$ , as used on particular occasions, frequently denote objects which do *not* uniquely satisfy their predicative content. For instance, a person's use of 'the man' in a token of 'the man insulted me' might denote a given man even though of course that man does not *uniquely* satisfy the noun phrase 'man'. Cases of this sort have often been mentioned as raising a difficulty for Russell's view of descriptions.<sup>2</sup> However, I think that no clear account of this difficulty has yet been given, and that no clearly correct theory of reference for definite descriptions has yet been proposed which will solve the difficulty. In this paper, I hope to remedy this situation.

What exactly is the difficulty posed for Russell's theory by denoting uses of terms like 'the man'? It is sometimes said that Russell's theory holds (and was designed to hold) only for those descriptions whose denotations are determined *independently of context*, while the denotations of terms like 'the man' are determined in part by features of the context of utterance. Sometimes, descriptions

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<sup>1</sup> See Russell [8], p. 51. The view I am calling 'Russell's view of descriptions' here and below, is of course not to be confused with Russell's famous *Theory of descriptions*, according to which descriptions are not genuine singular terms, but are to be contextually defined. The view I will discuss is a theory of *denotation* for definite descriptions, and has been held by philosophers such as Frege and Strawson, who disagree with Russell's contextual theory. I intend Russell's theory of denotation for descriptions to be neutral on the question of whether descriptions are genuine singular terms, or rather are contextually definable as Russell thought.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Strawson's [12], p. 37, and Searle's [11], p. 83.

of the former sort are called “complete” definite descriptions, while those of the latter sort are called “incomplete.”

A view of this sort has recently been proposed by Alan Brinton in [1]. According to Brinton, Russell’s theory holds for such “complete” definite descriptions as

- (a) the first man ever to run a mile in less than 4 minutes,
- (b) the positive square root of 4,
- (c) the father of Henry Ford III,

but fails to hold for such “incomplete” descriptions as

- (d) the man,
- (e) the senator,
- (f) the side of the house.

On this kind of view, Russell’s theory is not so much *wrong*, as it is lacking in generality: the theory holds for some, but not all, expressions of the form ‘the  $\phi$ ’.<sup>3</sup>

I think that there is a grain of truth in this position, but that, as it stands, the position is inadequate. One difficulty arises when attempting to distinguish the “complete” descriptions for which Russell’s theory was purportedly designed, from the “incomplete” descriptions to which Russell’s theory purportedly does not apply. What makes a description complete? Can we tell just by *looking* whether a description is complete or not?

Speaking of such descriptions as (a)—(c), Brinton says, “Such descriptions are ‘complete’ in the sense that if their descriptive content identifies anything, it identifies *only* one thing.” ([1], p. 402) For Brinton, then, a description is complete when its descriptive content

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<sup>3</sup> This is Brinton’s view *in effect*. Actually, that this is his view may not be obvious from a reading of his paper. According to Brinton, every sentence which contains a definite description is analyzable by another sentence in which a variable replaces the definite article ‘the’. When the description is “incomplete”, the variable is (typically) unbound, and “closure” of the open sentence in question is “effected” by the “contextual assignment of a value”. When the description is “complete”, the variable is bound by an existential quantifier, and the sentence in question receives its standard Russellian analysis. ([1], p. 403.) These technicalities aside, Brinton’s view is that Russell’s theory holds for “complete” descriptions, but it does not hold for “incomplete” descriptions, whose denotations (if any) are determined by features of the context of utterance.

has, as he says, a certain “logical property”, namely, that of being such that it (logically) *could not* apply to more than one thing. ([1], p. 403). But it is a mistake to think that Russell’s theory holds, or was designed to hold, only for descriptions which are complete in this sense. For instance, Russell would obviously have said that his theory applies to such a description as ‘the author of the novel entitled *Waverly*.’ He would have said this, even though he did not mistakenly believe it logically impossible that the novel entitled *Waverly* was coauthored. Moreover, Russell’s theory does in fact correctly describe one condition by virtue of which an object—Sir Walter Scott, say—may be denoted by such a description. So the claim that Russell’s theory holds, and was designed to hold, only for descriptions which are complete in Brinton’s sense, is false.

A second difficulty for the sort of view proposed by Brinton arises from its claim that Russell’s theory does not apply, and was not designed to apply, to any description whose denotation is in part determined by features of the context of utterance. It seems to me that on the contrary, the most commonly used descriptions to which Russell’s theory should be taken as applying do in fact have their denotations in part determined by contextual features. For instance, only an uncharitable reading of Russell would take him as not intending his theory to apply to such descriptions as:

- (g) the present king of France,
- (h) the man who will be the next Republican candidate for President,
- (i) the biggest man I have ever seen, and
- (j) the north side of that house.

It is of course true that descriptions like (g)—(j), construed as utterance-*types*, never have denotations at all. Various particular *uses*, or utterances, of (g) for instance, may denote various individuals, or no individual, depending on which man, if any, is king of France at the time of utterance.<sup>4</sup> Many of the definite descriptions which

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<sup>4</sup> Strawson points out this fact about (g) in [12]. The point is of course a valuable one, but in taking it to be an *objection* to Russell’s theory, Strawson was adopting an uncharitable attitude towards the theory. In this connection, see Russell’s response to Strawson in [10].

people actually use are like this, for many either contain verb phrases in the present, past or future tenses, or contain token reflexive singular terms whose denotations are determined by the context of utterance.

Can Russell's theory do justice to this fact? Only a slight emendation is necessary in order for it to do so. We simply understand it as applying to description-*tokens*, as follows:

- (*R*) If  $\alpha$  is a token of a definite description  $\lceil$ the  $\varphi$  $\rceil$ , then  $\alpha$  denotes an object  $x$  just in case  $x$ , and  $x$  alone, satisfies the token of  $\varphi$  contained in  $\alpha$ .

We also of course must understand that whether an object satisfies a token of a noun-phrase will often depend upon features of the context. For instance, an object  $x$  will satisfy the token of 'present king of France' contained in a token  $\alpha$  of (g) just in case  $x$  is a king of France at the time of  $\alpha$ 's utterance; an object  $x$  will satisfy the token of 'biggest man I have ever seen' contained in a token  $\beta$  of (i) just in case  $x$  is the biggest man ever seen by the speaker of  $\beta$  up to the time of  $\beta$ 's utterance; and so on.

To think of (*R*) as *other than* Russell's theory is to take a rather niggardly attitude towards that theory, it seems to me. I prefer to think of (*R*) as a slightly more refined version of the theory which Russell had in mind in the first place.

Proponents of a view like Brinton's lump together all descriptions whose denotations are determined by contextual features, call these "incomplete," and then claim that some theory other than Russell's is necessary to understand such descriptions. As we have seen, this classification is misleading, since it underestimates the power of Russell's theory to explain *via* (*R*) how the denotations of many uses of "incomplete" descriptions are in fact determined.

But this classification is worse than misleading, for it glosses over an important distinction between two different kinds of uses of "incomplete" descriptions. Some uses of incomplete descriptions have their denotations determined in the Russellian manner expressed by (*R*). But others, such as uses of 'the man', apparently have their denotations determined by some different principle. For no object uniquely satisfies any token of 'man', and so no token of 'the man' ever denotes an object by virtue of (*R*). We now have a problem at the level of

incomplete descriptions which is exactly the same as the problem with which we began. Obviously, the distinction between “complete” and “incomplete” descriptions has no relevance whatever to this “new” problem.

In order to adequately solve this problem, it is important to take note of the fact that *one and the same definite description* may on one occasion of use have its denotation determined in the manner expressed by (*R*), and on another occasion of use have its denotation determined by a different principle. Suppose Jones gives a party and a man attends whom Jones has never met before. This man informs Jones that he has just recently climbed Mt. Everest, and Jones, who is ignorant of such matters, mistakenly assumes that his guest is the only man ever to have accomplished this feat. The next day, Jones meets a friend and brags:

(1) The man who climbed Mt. Everest was at my party last night.

Clearly, Jones intends his use of “The man who climbed Mt. Everest” to denote a man by virtue of this man’s unique satisfaction of the noun-phrase ‘man who climbed Mt. Everest’. But of course there is no such man, and so Jones’s use of this description has no denotation, and Jones’s use of (1) is thereby false. In this case, we have a use of a definite description which conforms to (*R*).

Now suppose that Smith and Brown are both mountain-climbing buffs who are perfectly well aware that several men have reached the summit of Mt. Everest, and each knows that the other knows this. One night at a bar Smith and Brown meet one of the men who has climbed Everest, and they engage him in conversation. This is the only conqueror of Everest either Smith or Brown has ever met, and each knows that this is true of the other. Some time later, Smith meets Brown and says (1) to him. In this case, Smith does *not* intend his use of ‘the man who climbed Mt. Everest’ to denote a man by virtue of this man’s unique satisfaction of ‘man who climbed Mt. Everest’. Rather, Smith intends by use of this description to indicate to Brown which man he has in mind, by virtue of his and Brown’s mutual knowledge that each has met only one man who satisfies this description. It is clear, I think, that Smith’s use of ‘The man who climbed Everest’ denotes this man, and supposing him to have been at Smith’s party, this use of (1) is true.

Since in this case we have a use of a description which does not conform to (*R*), we need to find the principle to which this use does conform. A proposal which I find plausible is that in cases like this, the definite description 'the  $\varphi$ ' is used as a demonstrative, and has the same meaning as the corresponding demonstrative of the form 'that  $\varphi$ '. In my view, the denotations of such demonstratives are determined by the following principle:

- (*D*) If  $\alpha$  is a token of 'that  $\varphi$ ' uttered by a speaker *s* at *t*, then  $\alpha$  denotes an object *x* just in case *x*, and *x* alone, is an object to which *s* refers with  $\alpha$  at *t* and which satisfies the token of  $\varphi$  contained in  $\alpha$ .

Here, I intend 's refers to *x* with  $\alpha$  at *t*' to express the *psychological* relation of speaker-reference as opposed to the semantic relation of denotation.<sup>5</sup>

It seems, then, that many definite descriptions are *ambiguous*. A description like 'the man who climbed Mt. Everest' may be used so that its denotation is determined in the Russellian manner expressed by (*R*). In such a case, the description's denotation is completely independent of the speaker's own acts of reference and is determined solely by which object, if any, uniquely satisfies the description's matrix. Or this same description may be used as a demonstrative whose denotation is determined in the manner expressed by (*D*). In such a case, in contrast to cases governed by (*R*), the description's denotation is in part determined by the speaker's act of reference and in part by the object's satisfaction—but not *unique* satisfaction—of the description's matrix. The idea that some descriptions are ambiguous in this way was suggested in passing by Tyler Burge in [2], p. 216.

The kind of ambiguity in question, note, is not caused by an ambiguity in any word contained in a description's noun phrase,

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of this distinction see Kripke's [6]. For an account of speaker-reference, see Castañeda's papers [3] and [4]. I give a different analysis of this concept in my [7], pp. 190—193.

The principle (*D*) is essentially the same as a principle for such demonstratives which was proposed by Burge in [2], p. 211.

so it is not like the ambiguity of 'the biggest bank in town' which is caused by the ambiguity of 'bank'. Nor is it like the ambiguity of reference possessed by a description like 'the present king of France'. So it will be handy to have a special name for the type of ambiguity I am discussing. I will call it '*RD*-ambiguity'.

Are *all* descriptions *RD*-ambiguous? Before we can build a general theory, we must answer this question. At first glance, it seems obvious that certain kinds of descriptions are straightforwardly *not RD*-ambiguous. Take, for instance, descriptions like 'the unique author of *Waverly*', 'the only man to have climbed Mt. Everest', or 'the first man to set foot on the moon'. Surely, it seems, the denotations of such descriptions are always determined in the Russellian manner, and never in the manner of a demonstrative. (Cf. Burge [2], p. 216.) It seems, then, that on the correct theory, descriptions of this sort should turn out not to be *RD*-ambiguous, while others like 'the man who climbed Mt. Everest' should be treated as *RD*-ambiguous. What would such a theory look like?

Suppose we could distinguish those descriptions which are not *RD*-ambiguous from those which are. The ones which are not *RD*-ambiguous would form a class that includes such descriptions as those in which 'the' is followed by a word like 'unique' or 'only', or a superlative like 'first', 'biggest', and so forth. Suppose these are called the '*R*-descriptions'. Then Russell's theory would apply to the *R*-descriptions without exception. Thus, while (*R*) is literally false (because it implies that no description can be used as a demonstrative), we could revise (*R*) to obtain a true principle which applies to only the *R*-descriptions:

(*R*\*) If  $\alpha$  is a token of an *R*-description  $\lceil$ the  $\varphi^1$  $\rceil$ , then  $\alpha$  denotes an object  $x$  just in case  $x$ , and  $x$  alone, satisfies the token of  $\varphi$  contained in  $\alpha$ .

Supposing (*R*\*) to account for those descriptions which are not *RD*-ambiguous, we could propose the following principle for those which are:

(2) If  $\lceil$ the  $\varphi^1$  $\rceil$  is not an *R*-description and  $\alpha$  is a token of  $\lceil$ the  $\varphi^1$  $\rceil$ , then  $\alpha$  may mean the same as a token of  $\lceil$ the unique  $\varphi^1$  $\rceil$ , in which case

its denotation is determined in the manner expressed by ( $R^*$ ); or  $\alpha$  may mean the same as a token of  $\lceil$ that  $\varphi$  $\rceil$ , in which case its denotation is determined in the manner expressed by ( $D$ ).

Since it seems that some descriptions are  $RD$ -ambiguous, but that others are not, it is plausible to think that the correct theory is composed of ( $D$ ), ( $R^*$ ), and (2), under some interpretation of ' $R$ -description'. To obtain the correct theory, then, it should suffice to find the proper definition of the class of  $R$ -descriptions. However, I now wish to argue that no matter how we attempt to define such a class, the resulting theory is implausible. If I am right about this, then we shall have to conclude that, despite appearances to the contrary, *all* definite descriptions are  $RD$ -ambiguous.

Consider first a definition of ' $R$ -description' along the lines of Brinton's notion of a "complete" description:  $\lceil$ the  $\varphi$  $\rceil$  is an  $R$ -description if and only if  $\varphi$  has such a meaning that no token of  $\varphi$  could possibly be satisfied by more than one individual. According to this definition, 'the even prime number' is an  $R$ -description, since no object other than 2 could possibly be an even prime number. Thus ( $R^*$ ) applies to this description, and so it follows that 'the even prime number' must not be  $RD$ -ambiguous. But this is wrong. A student might use this description without being aware that there could be only one even prime. He might think that perhaps there is more than one, but on a given occasion uses 'the even prime number' intending to refer to the even prime number which his teacher had been talking about.<sup>6</sup>

Now in this case, the student clearly means his utterance of 'the even prime number' to be taken, not in the Russellian sense, but in the sense of 'that even prime number'. But could his utterance actually have the latter meaning? Not unless 'the even prime number' is  $RD$ -ambiguous. So if this term is *not*  $RD$ -ambiguous, we have to suppose that the student is *misusing* it. But it is surely wrong to convict the student of misusing language just because he is not aware that there could be at most one even prime number. On my intuitions, the student's usage would be perfectly in accord with the conventions for definite descrip-

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<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Lawrence Powers for this example.



tions, and therefore his utterance would mean the same as 'that even prime number'. But this can be true only if 'the even prime number' is *RD*-ambiguous, contrary to the present definition of an '*R*-description'. So this definition of '*R*-description' yields a false theory.

Perhaps we should try to enumerate the *R*-descriptions as follows: 'the  $\varphi$ ' is an *R*-description if and only if in 'the  $\varphi$ ', 'the' is followed by 'unique', 'only', 'one and only' or a superlative form of a modifier. But this definition is obviously inadequate, for it implies both that 'the biggest man on the team' is an *R*-description and not *RD*-ambiguous, and also that 'the man on the team who is bigger than every other man on the team' is *not* an *R*-description and *is* *RD*-ambiguous. But since the matrices of these two descriptions have exactly the same meaning, it is surely implausible to suggest that one of them is ambiguous while the other is not.

This failure suggests that we should try: 'the  $\varphi$ ' is an *R*-description if and only if  $\varphi$  has the same meaning as some noun-phrase  $\psi$  whose first word is 'unique', 'only', 'one and only', or a superlative form of a modifier. This definition has the consequence that 'the man on the team who is bigger than every other man on the team' is an *R*-description, and so is not *RD*-ambiguous. Also, since it seems reasonable to say that 'even prime number' does not mean the same as, for instance, 'only even prime number', this definition has the desirable consequence that 'the even prime number' is not an *R*-description.

But is the theory which results from this last definition really plausible? If we believe this theory, we are required to believe that the English conventions for definite descriptions allow one to meaningfully use a description like 'the even prime number' in the non-Russellian way as a demonstrative, but do *not* allow, say, 'the man on the team who is bigger than every other man on the team' to be used this way. Thus we would have to say that a speaker who attempted to use the latter description this way would be invoking the wrong convention, and so would be speaking nonsense. But it seems intrinsically implausible to suppose that our conventions for descriptions make a sharp distinction between the rules for using these two expressions: as regards the conventions governing their use, 'the even prime number' and 'the man on the team who is bigger than every

other man on the team' would seem to be in the same boat.<sup>7</sup>

So although it seems initially plausible that many definite descriptions are unambiguously Russellian, any attempt to distinguish these descriptions from those which are *RD*-ambiguous yields an implausible theory. Thus we must conclude that, despite appearances to the contrary, *all* definite descriptions are *RD*-ambiguous. Of course, the *point* of having the convention which allows descriptions to be used as demonstratives is to allow us to use them to denote objects which do not uniquely satisfy their predicative contents. So it would be unlikely that a person would use a description in this way unless, for all he knew, the description's content is satisfied by more than one object. Moreover, when the description is like 'the unique  $\varphi$ ' or 'the biggest  $\psi$ ' it would be unlikely that, for all the speaker knows, more than one object satisfies the description's content. Thus in any given case in which such a description is used, it is highly improbable that the speaker is using the description as a demonstrative to mean, say, 'that unique  $\varphi$ ' or 'that biggest  $\psi$ '. It is this fact which prompts the intuition that such descriptions are unambiguously Russellian. But we have seen that this intuition, while plausible, is nevertheless mistaken.<sup>8</sup>

Let me now fully state the theory on which all descriptions are ambiguous:

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<sup>7</sup> Still another attempt: 'the  $\varphi$ ' is an *R*-description iff  $\varphi$  has the same meaning as 'only  $\psi$ ', for some  $\psi$ . To escape the previous objection, we have to suppose that 'biggest man on the team' does not have the same meaning as 'only biggest man on the team'. So on the resulting theory, 'the biggest man on the team' is *RD*-ambiguous, but 'the only biggest man on the team' is not. This theory, I take it, is even more implausible than the one just discussed.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that demonstrative uses of descriptions which the speaker thinks have contents that are uniquely satisfied would all be what Donnellan has called "referential" uses of a definite description. (See his [5].) If descriptions were frequently used in this way, then there would frequently be a *semantic* difference between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions (though it would be a different semantic distinction than the one Donnellan had in mind). Of course, it is unlikely that descriptions *are* frequently used this way. It is more likely that in the cases which Donnellan describes as "referential", the speakers are invoking the Russellian convention, so that the denotations of the descriptions in these cases are determined in the Russellian manner (contrary to what Donnellan seems to think). For a thorough discussion of Donnellan's distinction, see Kripke's [6].

- (A) I. For any token  $\alpha$  of a definite description  $\lceil$ the  $\varphi$  $\rceil$  uttered by a speaker  $s$  at a time  $t$ :  $\alpha$  may be uttered either with the understanding that
- (a)  $\alpha$  is to denote an object  $x$  if and only if  $x$ , and  $x$  alone, satisfies the token of  $\varphi$  contained in  $\alpha$ ; or with the understanding that
  - (b)  $\alpha$  is to denote an object  $x$  if and only if  $x$ , and  $x$  alone, is an object to which  $s$  refers with  $\alpha$  at  $t$  and which satisfies the token of  $\varphi$  contained in  $\alpha$ .
- II. For any token  $\alpha$  of  $\lceil$ the  $\varphi$  $\rceil$  uttered by  $s$  at  $t$ :
- (c) if  $\alpha$  is uttered with the understanding that (a), then  $\alpha$  denotes an object  $x$  if and only if  $x$ , and  $x$  alone, satisfies the token of  $\varphi$  contained in  $\alpha$ .
  - (d) if  $\alpha$  is uttered with the understanding that (b), then  $\alpha$  denotes an object  $x$  if and only if  $x$ , and  $x$  alone, both is referred to by  $s$  with  $\alpha$  at  $t$  and satisfies the token of  $\varphi$  contained in  $\alpha$ .

(A), if it is correct, amounts to a complete vindication of Russell's view. For according to (A), Russell gave an accurate account of *one* meaning which every definite description has. Nor was Russell unaware that descriptions like 'the man' are frequently used with a meaning different from the kind he discusses (see [8], p. 44). As he said, he was concerned with explaining that meaning of definite descriptions in which 'the' is used "strictly, so as to imply uniqueness." ([9], p. 30.)

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