

The Loss of Uniqueness

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Philosophers and linguists alike tend to call a semantic theory ‘Russellian’ just in case it assigns to sentences in which definite descriptions occur the truth-conditions Russell did in ‘On Denoting’. This is unfortunate; those particular truth-conditions do no explanatory work in Russell’s writings. As far as the semantics of descriptions is concerned, the key insight of ‘On Denoting’ is that definite descriptions are scope-bearing elements: anyone who acknowledges this much can account for Russell’s puzzle cases the way he did. Russell had no substantive argument for the claim that ‘The *F* is *G*’ entails ‘There is at most one *F*’; in fact, he had important misgivings about it. I outline an argument against this claim, and I argue that by holding on to uniqueness contemporary semanticists make a momentous mistake: they keep the illusion alive that there is a way to account for linguistic meaning without addressing what linguistic expressions are for.

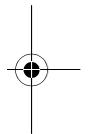
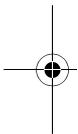
Towards the middle of Strawson’s ‘On Referring’ there is a curious remark about uniqueness.¹ It is typically read as a simple objection: since the sentence ‘The table is covered with books’ can be used to make a true assertion despite the existence of many tables, the Russellian truth-conditions for this sentence cannot be correct. The simple objection has a simple answer: like other quantifying phrases, definite descriptions come with domains of quantification, and the truth of an assertion made by uttering this sentence requires nothing more than the existence of a unique table within that domain. This answer has by now gained the standing of orthodoxy.² But there remain some who think it is a superficial one: it deals with the particular example, but fails to resolve the underlying problem with Russell’s theory.³

I begin by briefly reviewing the case against uniqueness. My main concern here, however, is not so much whether the case stands, but why it matters whether it does. Do we lose anything of substance from Russell’s own insights or the subsequent use to which they were put if we drop the uniqueness clause from his analysis of definite descriptions?

¹ Strawson (1950), pp. 347–8.

² For a canonical discussion of the Russellian response, see Neale (1990), sect. 3.7.

³ Advocates of such dissenting views include Kempson (1975), Lewis (1979), Heim (1982), Zvolensky (1997), Breheny (1999), Szabó (2000), Roberts (2003), and Ludlow and Segal (2004).



At first sight, the answer seems obvious. Russell thinks the definite article, when it combines into a singular noun phrase,⁴ behaves like the *iota*-operator of the *Principia Mathematica*, which in turn is fully characterized by the following two contextual definitions:⁵

$$*_{14.01} \quad [(\iota x)(\Phi x)] \Psi(\iota x)(\Phi x) =_{df} (\exists x)((\forall y)(\Phi y \leftrightarrow y = x) \wedge \Psi x)$$

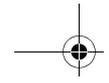
$$*_{14.02} \quad E!(\iota x)(\Phi x) =_{df} (\exists x)((\forall y)(\Phi y \leftrightarrow y = x))$$

If English sentences containing singular definite descriptions don't entail uniqueness then—assuming nothing uniquely satisfies Φ —the translation of *any* instance of either schema to English is false. So, in a clear sense, if uniqueness goes so does all the theory of descriptions. But this is not a good way to think about the *significance* of uniqueness within Russell's theory: the semantic insights of 'On Denoting' are more or less independent of the specifics of the truth-conditions given there. Or so I will argue in this paper.

The real bite of the problem of uniqueness is that if we accept that indefinite and definite articles are truth-conditionally equivalent we must look for the source of their glaring difference in meaning elsewhere. Admitting this does not merely add to our list of minimal pairs illustrating that meaning goes beyond truth-conditions. Someone who thinks 'steed' and 'horse' are synonyms may be a competent speaker of English with a small gap in his education; someone who thinks 'but' and 'and' are synonyms will miss the point of many remarks but may still get by fairly well in speech and writing. But someone who does not appreciate the difference in meaning between 'the' and 'an' will be linguistically much impaired. This is not only because these words are very common—'the' typically comes out first and 'a(n)' fourth or fifth on the list of most frequently used words compiled on the basis of written corpora—but because the contrast between their meanings is one of the key devices that help English speakers to keep track of who or what is being discussed in a conversation.

⁴I follow the common practice of calling phrases like 'the present king of France' and 'the author of *Waverley*' noun phrases despite the fact that it is a matter of controversy whether the head of such phrases is the definite article or the noun that follows it. Nothing here hangs on this syntactic question, so I decided to go with the usual label.

⁵The square brackets in *_{14.01} indicate *which* formula the contextual definition must be applied to. In contemporary terms, the device functions as a scope indicator: in the definiendum of *_{14.01} the *iota*-term takes scope over any scope-bearing element within Ψ . The symbol 'E!' in *_{14.02} is proxy for an existence predicate. Russell and Whitehead introduce this symbolism so as to have a way of expressing negative existentials containing *iota*-terms without allowing negative existentials containing genuine singular terms.



Compare the following stories, which differ only in the italicized articles:

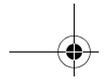
- (1) A man in a rented tuxedo is sitting in a bar drinking one martini after the other. Suddenly *the* man jumps on the table and starts singing the *Marseillaise*.
- (2) A man in a rented tuxedo is sitting in a bar drinking one martini after the other. Suddenly *a* man jumps on the table and starts singing the *Marseillaise*.

Anyone reading (1) will assume that the man in the tuxedo was the one who started to sing; anyone reading (2) will take it that it was someone else. It is by no means easy for a Russellian to account for these facts, but perhaps it can be done. About (1) one might say that charity requires the selection of a domain for the relevant definite description which contains a single contextually salient man, and that the only sensible way this can be done is to pick a domain that contains no one but the man in a rented tuxedo mentioned in the first sentence. The speaker of (2) used an indefinite description instead of a definite one; perhaps it is manifest that the reason for this choice is that she wished to avoid the implication that the two sentences concern the same man, in which case she implicated that they concern different men. There is plenty to quibble with these explanations. My point is purely illustrative: they show that there may well be a sensible account of the contrast between (1) and (2) based on Russellian truth-conditions.

These explanations crucially rely on the assumption that there is *some* truth-conditional difference between indefinite and definite descriptions. If this assumption fails, there is no hope for a truth-condition based account of the above contrast, and by extension, no hope for a truth-condition based account of our ability to comprehend expressions larger than sentences. We don't just have to abandon a purely truth-conditional conception of semantics—we must revise the idea that truth-conditions comprise the unique component of linguistic meaning that is explanatorily basic. This is what I think is at stake in the debate about uniqueness.

The outline of the paper is as follows. First, I summarize what I take to be the cleanest argument against Russellian truth-conditions.⁶ In the

⁶ It is cleanest in the sense that it addresses uniqueness head on and does not rely on controversial claims about methodology or substantive assumptions from linguistics. More indirect arguments against uniqueness in singular definite descriptions include cross-linguistic comparisons (cf. Ludlow and Segal (2004)), putative universals about quantificational determiners (cf. Szabó (2000)) and considerations involving the licensing of negative polarity items (cf. Rothschild (2004)).



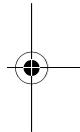
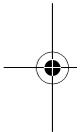
next section, I raise the question how much Russell himself would be bothered by this argument. My tentative answer is that the issue is marginal to his concerns—he did not believe that an empirically adequate semantics is possible for natural languages and he was not interested in devising theories that are merely close to being adequate. If despite Russell’s contrary intentions, we are determined to view his theory of descriptions as part of the semantics of English, we need to settle what components of the original view we should hold on to. In section 3, I argue that the current focus on the particular truth-conditions he gave is misguided—the semantic *explanations* in ‘On Denoting’ put almost no constraint on what the truth-conditional content of the definite article might be. We can drop uniqueness and remain true Russellians about descriptions, if we wish. But we should not. In the final section, I argue that the Russell-inspired view that descriptions could *in principle* be eliminated from a language that is equipped with standard quantifiers and the identity predicate is mistaken. Whatever descriptions are, they are not mere devices of quantification.

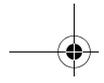
1.

The passage where Strawson raises the uniqueness problem for Russell’s theory is rarely quoted, perhaps because it is significantly less straightforward than the use many want to put it to. Here is the text in full:⁷

Consider the sentence, ‘The table is covered with books.’ It is quite certain that in any normal use of this sentence, the expression ‘the table’ would be used to make a unique reference, i.e. to refer to some one table. It is a quite strict use of the definite article, in the sense in which Russell talks on p. 30 of *Principia Mathematica*, of using the article ‘*strictly*, so as to imply uniqueness’. On the same page Russell says that a phrase of the form ‘the so-and-so’, used strictly, will only have an application in the event of there being one so-and-so and no more. Now it is obviously false that the phrase ‘the table’ in the sentence ‘the table is covered with books’, used normally, will ‘only have an application in the event of there being one table and no more’. It is indeed tautologically true that, in such a use, the phrase will have an application only in the event of there being one table and no more *which is being referred to*, and that it will be understood to have an application only in the event of there being one table and no more which it is understood as being used to refer to. To use the sentence is not to assert, but it is (in the special sense discussed) to imply, that there is only one thing which is *both* of the kind specified (i.e. a table) *and is being referred to* by the speaker.

⁷ Strawson (1950), p. 348.





One thing is clear: Strawson does not claim that Russell's theory is incorrect because

(3) The table is covered with books

can be true even though there are many tables. And it is good that he does not, for Russell's theory—in its most careful formulation—does not say that this sentence entails that there is a unique table. Russell is rather cautious about uniqueness. In 'On Denoting' he points out that we *frequently* speak of 'the son of So-and-so' even though So-and-so has several sons, and claims only that the uniqueness entailment is present when the definite description is used *strictly*.⁸ It is true that he also says that instead of using 'the son of So-and-so' non-strictly, 'it would be more correct to say "a son of So-and-so"; but this comment in no way diminishes the significance of the earlier one. Correct or not, we do *in fact* use sentences containing definite descriptions non-strictly, and when we do those sentences carry no uniqueness entailments.⁹ On p. 30 of the *Principia* he does not repeat the example, but says again that 'the so-and-so' has application only if there is just one so-and-so—as long as the description is used strictly. This again suggests that if the description is not used strictly, 'the so-and-so' may well have application even though there are many so-and-so's. What Strawson rejects as obviously false is the idea that the uniqueness entailment is present when the definite description in (3) is used *normally*. This does not conflict with Russell's views, as long as it can be maintained that the normal use of this sentence is not strict, and hence falls outside the purview of Russell's theory. Call the thesis that this is so the *simple response* to the uniqueness problem.

In his brief and somewhat impatient rejoinder to 'On Referring', Russell does not address the question of uniqueness, so it remains unknown what exactly he thought about this matter.¹⁰ But, given his earlier commitments, *could* he have given the simple response? Strawson does not think so. He says that the normal use of (3) *is* strict 'in the sense in which Russell talks on p. 30 of *Principia Mathematica*, of using the article "*strictly*, so as to imply uniqueness?" This is a rather misleading claim: although the phrase is Russell's, the sense is not. For Russell,

⁸ Russell (1905), p. 213.

⁹ It is also good to remember that Russell's aside about correct use is false. Even if so-and-so has many sons, we could not replace the definite article with an indefinite one in the following sentence without being misunderstood: 'One of so-and-so's sons was discussing *Waverley* in an illustrious company and the son of so-and-so showed himself to be completely ignorant.'

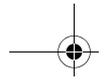
¹⁰ Russell (1957).

if the description in (3) is used strictly, *the sentence* entails that there is just one table; for Strawson, if the description in (3) is used strictly, *the speaker* implies that there is just one table he is referring to.¹¹ Strawson is right that the normal use of this description within this sentence is strict in the latter sense. But nothing in Russell's theory is incompatible with this claim—Russell could easily concede that in normal cases when a speaker utters (3) she implies that there is a unique table she is talking about *and* that her sentence (not being used strictly in Russell's own sense) does not entail that there is only one table.

The simplicity of this response is due to its incompleteness. Suppose someone were to suggest that 'large' when used strictly applies to all and only things that have the same size as the universe, add that we hardly ever use the word strictly, and leave the discussion at that. As eccentric as this view sounds, its main problem is not that it goes against our gut instincts about 'large'—it is rather that we cannot properly evaluate it. We are not told *what it is* to use sentences containing 'large' strictly. The simple response to Strawson's objection has the same problem. If in sentences used normally certain definite descriptions have logical properties that are distinct from the ones Russell's theory ascribes to them, he owes us further discussion of these uses. He does not provide such a discussion, which is why so many commentators have passed over Russell's cautious remarks about uniqueness in silence.

Russellians need a less reticent response to the uniqueness problem. There are two options. The first is to stick with the letter of the theory and neglect Russell's suggestion that sentences containing definite descriptions have different truth-conditions depending on the kind of use those sentences are put to. (3) entails the unique existence of a table, which makes it unsuited to express a truth, but still suitable to make a true assertion. What is asserted can diverge from what is expressed—think of irony or sarcasm, for example—and perhaps the gap is bigger than theorists have traditionally thought. Perhaps sentences containing definite descriptions are routinely used to make assertions whose content differs from the content of the sentence that is used to make the assertion; if so, observations about the former are beside the point when the latter is under discussion. Call this the *dismissive response* to the problem of uniqueness. The second option is to give up the letter of

¹¹ In the passage of 'On Denoting' quoted above Russell says that '*the*, when it is strictly used, involves uniqueness' not 'when *the* is strictly used, the use involves uniqueness', and 'for our purposes we take *the* as involving uniqueness' not 'for our purposes we take uses of *the* as involving uniqueness'. Strawson is usually rather sensitive to the fact that Russell does not cash out his proposal in terms of uses, so this lapse is odd.

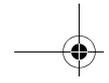


the theory in order to save its spirit. Sentences containing definite descriptions indeed fail to have the sort of uniqueness entailments one would ascribe to them blindly following Russell's theory. Nonetheless, there is a straightforward way to make adjustments to get more realistic uniqueness entailments. The idea is that (3) does not entail the unique existence of a table, only the unique existence of a table within some contextually determined domain. This is the *concessive response* to the problem of uniqueness.¹²

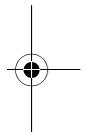
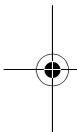
The dismissive response recommends a straightforward semantics for descriptions that does not meddle with the contexts in which they are used. Context matters for the interpretation of the utterance, even for determining exactly what was asserted, but it plays no role in assigning content to a sentence like (3).¹³ The response comes with a price tag: the larger the difference between the contents of declarative sentences and the contents of assertions we normally make in using those declarative sentences, the more tenuous the relationship between semantic theory and our evidence supporting it. Normally we want to know what speech act the speaker made and our interest in the words and sentences employed is instrumental—the task of eliciting intuitions that are purely about linguistic expressions is a delicate matter. Postulating unperceived differences between sentential and assertive content opens the gates for ad hoc proposals about the former. To return to the earlier example, someone attracted to the dismissive response might equally well suggest that while the assertion made by a speaker who utters 'London is large' has the content that London is large compared to members of a contextually salient comparison class (e.g. the class of European capitals) the sentence itself has the content that London has the same size as the universe. The suggestion is simple and clear; it is also suspiciously well shielded from refutation. The dismissive response to the uniqueness problem is a *sceptical* proposal: pointing out the possibility of a gap between appearance (assertoric content) and reality (sentential content), it paves the way for theories about the latter that would otherwise be dismissed for their poor match with our intuitions.

¹² What should we say of those who deny that sentences like (3) lack truth-conditional content *because* the domain of the definite description is only settled contextually? (3) might be said to have a 'sub-propositional logical form' (cf. Sperber and Wilson (1986), p. 188), it may express a 'propositional radical' (cf. Bach (1994), p. 269). Either way, only a use of (3) could be true or false. Such theorists will not like the way the concessive response is presented here, but they could rephrase it so the issue is not about the uniqueness entailment of (3) relative to a context of utterance, but the uniqueness entailment of certain assertions made by uttering (3).

¹³ For a defence of the dismissive response see Bach (1987), pp. 103–8.



It is hard to argue with sceptical proposals, especially if one does not feel like begging the question. We must take at least *some* intuitions about sentences seriously. Logic is a natural place to make a stand. I am willing to accept for the sake of argument that quantification is always unrestricted and that my intuition that the sentence ‘Every table is covered with books’ is true in certain contexts is mistaken—I grant that since there is at least one table in the universe that is not covered with books, this sentence is false. I take it that it is an important advantage of this sort of view that it entails without further caveat that ‘Every table is covered with books and some table is not covered with books’ is a contradiction. This is an advantage exactly because logical intuitions are privileged, because they are not subject to the same kind of scepticism ordinary truth-conditional intuitions are. My belief that ‘Every table is covered with books and some table is not covered with books’ is a contradiction is not derived from the intuition that this sentence must be false; rather, I am inclined to believe that this sentence must be false *because* I have the intuition that it is a contradiction. This latter intuition is grounded in my understanding of logical vocabulary and in my ability to discern a certain logically relevant structure in the sentence. Both of these abilities are hopefully in good order even if I tend to confuse sentence content and assertoric content and consequently am unreliable in assessing truth-conditions.



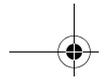
I don’t claim that logical intuitions are infallible—this would be foolish in the face of the logical paradoxes. The claim is only that they are relatively immune to a certain sceptical worry, one that is fuelled by the possibility of unnoticed but otherwise perfectly ordinary context-sensitivity. If the special standing of logical intuitions is granted, the inadequacy of the dismissive response follows quickly—(4) does not strike me (and I hope the reader) as a contradiction, while (5) clearly does:¹⁴

- (4) The table was made in the same year as another table.
- (5) There is just one table and that table was made in the same year as another table.

If the definite article is interpreted along Russellian lines and quantification is unrestricted these sentences are equivalent. This is why the dismissive response has seemed to so many of us unconvincing and

¹⁴ Examples of this sort are many in the literature. Here are some examples: ‘The pig is grunting, but the pig with floppy ears is not grunting’ (Lewis (1973), p. 115), ‘The dog got in a fight with another dog’ (McCawley (1979), p. 378), ‘If a bishop meets another bishop, the bishop blesses the other bishop’ (originally due to Hans Kamp).





why most defenders of Russellian truth-conditions opt for the concessive response.

The idea behind the concessive response is already present in the very passage Strawson raises the problem of uniqueness. He claims that the phrase ‘the table’ in its normal, referring use ‘will have an application only in the event of there being one table and no more *which is being referred to*’. Strawson himself would not build these adjusted application-conditions into the truth-conditions of (3): a large part of ‘On Referring’ is taken up by an argument that they are instead part of what speakers tend to *presuppose* when uttering that sentence. But many have resisted this idea and applied Russell’s own theory to the adjusted description Strawson mentions. Here is Grice’s classic statement about how to turn Strawson’s insight into a full-scale defence of Russell:¹⁵

Consider an utterance of such a sentence as *The book on the table is not open*. As there are, obviously, many books on tables in the world, if we are to treat such a sentence as being of the form *The F is not G* and as being, on that account, ripe for Russellian expansion, we might do well to treat it as exemplifying the more specific form *The F' which is ϕ is not G*, where ‘ ϕ ’ represents an epithet to be identified in a particular context of utterance (‘ ϕ ’ being a sort of quasi-demonstrative). Standardly, to identify the reference of ‘ ϕ ’ for a particular utterance of *The book on the table is (not) open*, a hearer would proceed via the identification of a particular book as being a good *candidate* for being the book meant, and would identify the reference of ‘ ϕ ’ by finding in the candidate a feature, for example, that of *being in this room*, which could be used to yield a composite epithet (‘book on the table in this room’), which would in turn fill the bill of being an epithet which the speaker had in mind as being uniquely satisfied by the book selected as a candidate.

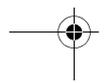
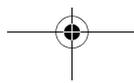
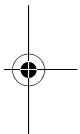
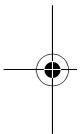
Reverting to Strawson’s original example, Grice suggests that in the right context (3) is—in some sense—a proxy for (3’). When interpreted along Russellian lines, the truth-conditions of this latter sentence match reasonably well with our intuitions about the (contextually relativized) truth-conditions of the former:

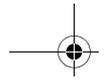
- (3) The table is covered with books
- (3’) The table in this room is covered with books.

If this is correct, we have a way to account for the intuition that (4) is not a contradiction. In a context like the one we considered for (3), (4) is proxy for (4’), which is manifestly consistent:

- (4) The table was made in the same year as another table

¹⁵ Grice (1981), pp. 276–7.





- (4') The table in this room was made in the same year as another table.

So the concessive response does not founder where the dismissive response does.

Note that Grice departs from Strawson's suggestion in liberalizing the contextual restriction on the application of the description. What restricts the application of the description need not be the feature of *being referred to*, it might be something more mundane and closer to what one might naturally think of, say, *being in this room*. As a result, Grice's proposal can be *in principle* extended beyond the referring uses of definite descriptions. Non-referring uses are in no way exceptional—although Strawson is certainly right that 'the table' in (3) would almost always be used by someone who intends to refer to a particular table, there are countless sentences containing definite descriptions for which this is not true. The most straightforward examples are those where the description is interpreted within the scope of a quantifier; the problem of uniqueness arises with such sentences as well. Consider (6):

- (6) Every book is on the table where Max put it.

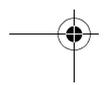
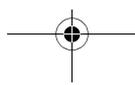
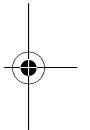
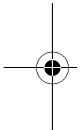
Russellian truth-conditions for the dominant reading of this sentence require that for every book there be a unique table where Max put it. But surely (6) can be used to make a true assertion even if Max put some book at different tables at different times. The concessive response brings this observation in line with Russell's theory by expanding the sentence with an appropriate epithet:

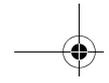
- (6') Every book is on the table where Max put it last.

This certainly seems to capture what (6) would normally be used to assert. The uniqueness requirement now looks much more innocent: for every book there must be a unique table where Max put it last.¹⁶

There are many ways of integrating epithets into a semantic theory, but all seem to fit in one of two broad categories. The first is to say that within a particular context of utterance (3) is *elliptical* for (3'). 'Ellipsis' needn't be taken in a strict syntactic sense here, but we do need something beyond the mere label. A minimal requirement might be that anyone who understands (3) in the relevant context of utterance recov-

¹⁶ In fact, I don't think this requirement is innocent. Suppose Max put a book on *two* adjacent tables last—I don't think this should suffice for making (6) false. In my view (6) is true as long as every book is still on some table where Max put it last. More on this below.





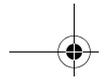
ers the ‘missing’ words ‘in this room’ and uses her understanding of those words in interpreting (3).¹⁷ Alternatively, one might suggest that the interpretation of (3) is relative to a *parameter* whose value is set by the context of utterance, and (3’) expresses in an absolute way what (3) does relative to that value of the parameter. Again, proponents of this view need not commit themselves to a fully specific notion of a parameter. The common ground among them might be that anyone who understands (3) in the relevant context recovers the ‘missing’ semantic value of ‘in this room’ and uses it in interpreting (3).¹⁸ Although it clearly makes an enormous difference for the form of one’s theory of meaning which approach one follows, we can bracket the issue when thinking about the possibility of a successful concessive response to the problem of uniqueness.¹⁹

The usual worry about the concessive response—whether it is ultimately cashed out as an ellipsis or a parameter view—is the overabundance of eligible epithets. You utter the words ‘The table is covered with books’ standing in a large sunlit room with walls freshly painted talking to me, and perhaps you express the proposition that the table *in that room* is covered with books. But why not the proposition that the table *in that large sunlit room with walls freshly painted* is covered with books? Or why not the proposition that the table *over there* is covered with books? It seems hard to believe that there is anything that could settle such questions. I see why this is a worry about semantics in general, but

¹⁷ This does not mean that anyone who understands an *utterance* of (3) must do so in part by recovering missing words from the context. For an utterance of a sentence may be understood without the sentence itself being understood. It is an everyday experience of people interacting in a foreign-language environment that they may be perfectly clear about what an utterance meant even though they are ignorant about the expressions used in it.

¹⁸ This leaves open the question whether the parameter is something we should locate in the logical form of (3), or leave it in the meta-language stating the interpretative clause for that sentence. Those who prefer the latter option often say that the value of the parameter is then an “unarticulated constituent” of the content expressed by (3).

¹⁹ Appeals to epithets are rarely clear about the exact way they are supposed to feature in semantics. Consider, for example, the above quote from Grice. On the one hand, Grice thinks that the speaker has a particular epithet in mind whose reference is the feature of being in this room, which suggests the ellipsis approach. On the other hand, he says that the feature (together with the sentence uttered) can be used to yield the epithet, and I find it hard not to take this as a gesture towards the parameter approach. I don’t think Grice would have disputed that the feature being in this room is expressed by more than one English phrase. (To stay on the safe side of the debates about the metaphysics of properties, consider just ‘in this room’ and ‘inside this room.’) It seems more likely that his guarded phrase in the last sentence of the quote—the epithet identified by the hearer ‘would fill the bill of being the epithet the speaker had in mind’—should be taken as expressing that from a semantic point of view the distinction between different phrases expressing the same feature is immaterial. The missing epithet is a ‘sort of quasi-demonstrative’—exactly which quasi-demonstrative is beside the point as long as it picks out the right feature.



I don't think it is relevant to the concessive response in particular. It may be discomforting to acknowledge that there is no basis for such a choice, but as far as the Russellian theory of descriptions is concerned, one may simply take indeterminacy on board. As long as *all* the acceptable epithets yield sensible truth-conditions the fact that we see no grounds for choosing among them is not a weighty objection.

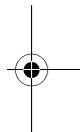
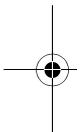
The real problem with the concessive response is not that there are usually too many epithets to save the Russellian theory; it is rather that sometimes there are none. The crucial cases arise when definite descriptions apply to very similar objects. Consider the following example:²⁰

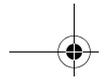
- (7) A wine glass broke last night. The glass had been very expensive.

Suppose two glasses broke last night and the only significant difference between them is that when the first one broke Michelle was very upset, but by the time the second broke she no longer cared. Suppose Michelle is uttering (7) addressing Lloyd who was not at the party and who at the time of the utterance knows nothing about what happened there. The intuitions that the utterance is true under such circumstances, and that (7) itself is not a contradiction are rather robust. According to the concessive reply, in order to bring this observation in line with Russell's theory we need an epithet which applies to one but not the other of the glasses. The candidates fall in one of two categories: those that distinguish the two glasses no matter what Michelle thinks but are unavailable to Lloyd, and those that are available to Lloyd but distinguish the glasses only if Michelle has the right sorts of thoughts. Paradigm examples of epithets in the former category are: 'which broke before another glass did' and 'the breaking of which made Michelle upset'; paradigm examples of the latter are: 'which Michelle has in mind' and 'which is being referred to'. One might immediately suggest that appeal to such epithets is ad hoc, but to make that claim stick one would need certain assumptions, which in turn would leave room for manoeuvre for the Russellian.

We can do better than that. Let's drop the idea that one glass broke before the other and that the breaking of one but not the other made Michelle upset—that gets rid of epithet candidates in the first category. To eliminate the ones in the second replace Michelle as the speaker—let's say she was killed last night. (7) is uttered by Dr Watson who is investigating the crime scene and who is addressing Sherlock Holmes in

²⁰ Heim (1982), p. 28 and 32.





the other room. As Watson speaks, he is looking at pieces of broken glass on the floor. Watson is no Holmes: he does not realize that he is looking at pieces that came from two different wine glasses. He may think he has a specific glass in mind or that he is referring to a specific glass—the one whose pieces he is looking at—but he is mistaken. He has no thoughts that are about one glass rather than the other. Still, I think the truth of (7) in Watson's mouth is no more in doubt than in Michelle's.

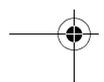
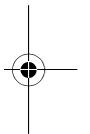
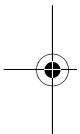
Some find this intuition dubious, and I concede that the matter is not straightforward. There is, however, one way to push the disagreement from intuitions about truth-conditions to intuitions about logic. Imagine that Holmes enters the room and immediately sees that there are pieces from two glasses on the floor. He finds this all very curious and as he lights his pipe he says to Watson:

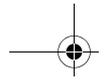
- (8) The fact that a glass broke last night is already significant. But the fact that the pieces of *the glass* are all mixed up with the pieces of another one completely indiscernible from the first is truly remarkable.

Those who are partial to the concessive response to the problem of uniqueness have no way to save Holmes from serious embarrassment. If the domain of the underlined definite description contains both glasses then the Russellian truth-conditions guarantee that (8) is a contradiction. If the domain contains but one of them then Holmes contradicts himself in saying that the glasses are completely indiscernible. Of course, one can bite the bullet and say that (8) is really a harmless contradiction.²¹ But it does not sound contradictory at all. As before, I am inclined to dig in my heels when it comes to intuitions about logic. Since we do not need to get the truth-conditions of (8) right in order to assess whether it is a contradiction, context cannot fool us here.

It is an old charge that Russell's theory cannot fully accommodate anaphoric uses of definite descriptions. The truth is that it can go a long way if the semantics appeals to epithets; trouble cases arise only if the description applies to items that are for all practical purposes indiscernible. The moral of the example is that definite descriptions don't *in general* carry uniqueness entailments, which means that we must explain away intuitions that suggest *in particular cases* otherwise. I believe the source of those faulty intuitions is—as Strawson correctly pointed out more than half a century ago—the fact that *speakers* who

²¹ One may also suggest that Holmes knowingly exaggerates when he says the glasses are completely indiscernible. To pre-empt this sort of response, in Szabó (2003) I gave an example involving two elementary particles that are genuinely indiscernible.





utter sentences with definite descriptions do quite often implicate uniqueness of some sort, and that it is easy to mistake such implications for genuine entailments. This still leaves us with the task of accounting why, when, and how hearers take speakers to have implied uniqueness upon uttering definite descriptions. A lot hangs on the details of these explanations—if they are implausible or theoretically heavy-handed, sticking to the Russellian truth-conditions may still be the best idea despite the difficulties mentioned above. My aim in this paper is not to convince the reader that the uniqueness problem is an insurmountable difficulty for the Russellian theory.²² Given the difficulties brought out by (7) and (8) I will assume that it is at the very least a serious difficulty, and I will ask what the significance of this fact might be.

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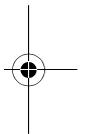
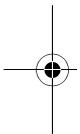
Russell leaves no doubt where he thinks the importance of his theory of descriptions lies: in logic and in epistemology.²³ But these are definitely not the fields where the impact of the theory was most strongly felt.

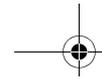
As a contribution to logic, the theory has two parts: a proposal concerning the interpretation of the usual quantifiers and an explicit assimilation of the indefinite and definite articles to these expressions. Neither part changed the logical landscape significantly. The foundations of modern quantification theory were already laid by 1879 in Frege's *Begriffsschrift*; the final conceptual and technical touches had to wait until Tarski's *Wahrheitsbegriff* of 1935. The features setting Russell's views on quantification clearly apart from those of Frege or Tarski concern the philosophical foundations of the theory and made no significant headway into logic proper. The idea that as far as logic is concerned, the indefinite article should be treated in whatever way one treats the existential quantifier has never seemed revolutionary. And although the insight that the definite article may also be regarded as a quantifier (definable in terms of the usual ones plus identity) was interesting and probably novel, after the *Principia Mathematica* few logicians felt the need to introduce such a symbol into their formalism. Indeed, the *iota*-notation is rarely used after its early appearances in the *Principia* itself, its function being primarily to facilitate the introduction of another abbreviation.²⁴

²² I argued against Russellian truth-conditions for definite descriptions in Szabó (2000) and Szabó (2003).

²³ Russell (1905), p. 41.

²⁴ Russell and Whitehead (1910), p. 67.





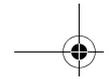
In the theory of knowledge, the impact was more significant but ambiguous at best. Thanks to Russell, the terms ‘knowledge by acquaintance’ and ‘knowledge by description’ are now part of the common vocabulary of analytic philosophy, and many have readily accepted the need for a distinction between direct and indirect epistemic access to things. Still, few were satisfied with drawing the line between kinds of epistemic access exactly as Russell did, and even fewer put their faith in a foundationalism that grounds all knowledge (not only of things but of truths as well) in acquaintance. Russell construed acquaintance as infallible and came to believe that we bear this relation to sense-data, to universals, and possibly to ourselves, but definitely not to physical objects or other minds.²⁵ Not only did this strike almost everyone as misguided, it also raises serious difficulties for the application of the theory of descriptions to propositional attitude reports. If George IV cannot be acquainted with the author of *Waverley* (Scott not being reducible to sense-data, universals, and George IV himself) it is hard to see how George IV could ever have wished to know, concerning the man who in fact wrote *Waverley* (and whom, let’s say, he had seen from a distance), whether *he* was Scott.²⁶

Posterity abandoned Russell’s focus on logic and epistemology and gradually came to see ‘On Denoting’ as a milestone in ontology. Today when pressed about the significance of Russell’s theory of descriptions most philosophers would tell the familiar story about how it helps eliminating commitment to dubious entities. But Russell’s way of banishing the present king of France has lost much of its initial appeal. True, thanks to him we are no longer puzzled by sentences like ‘The present king of France does not exist’. We assume that the negation may take scope over the definite description and, given that there is no existing entity denoted by ‘the present king of France’, this reading of the sentence comes out true, as it should. But the ontological difficulty — if there really is one — must remain whether we decide to talk about the present king of France using this empty description, or using an empty name, like ‘Henri VII’.²⁷ Russell would be the first to agree, which is why he claimed that empty names are truncated definite descriptions. For Russell, sentences containing the symbol ‘4/0’ are meaningful and their meaning remains the same if the empty name is replaced by ‘the

²⁵ Russell (1910), p. 23.

²⁶ Cf. Soames (2003), p. 122 – 126.

²⁷ ‘Henri VII’ is used by some French royalists to refer to Henri Philippe Pierre Marie, the Count of Paris. He is the Orleanist pretender to the French throne. Legally and within the larger public, ‘Henry VII’ is a name without a bearer.



number which multiplied by 0 gives 4.' He is also willing to say that 'a proposition about Apollo means what we get by substituting what the classical dictionary tells us is meant by Apollo, say "the sun-god"'.²⁸ Such claims are widely believed to have been refuted by Kripke's arguments in *Naming and Necessity*, which leaves most of us still puzzled about 'Henri VII does not exist'.²⁹ If empty names are not disguised descriptions Russell offers no solution to the problem of non-existence and the theory of descriptions is a milestone in ontology that we must leave behind.

Where Russell's theory made a real and lasting difference is the semantics of natural language. The theory—as a view about the truth-conditions sentences containing indefinite and definite articles—is alive and well. This, I think, is even more surprising than the fact that Russell's theory failed to have a real effect where its author intended (in logic and epistemology), or that it failed to have a lasting effect where most of its admirers thought (in ontology). For although Russell presents his views as a theory about how descriptions *ought* to be interpreted to avoid formal refutation and to solve certain puzzles, he makes no attempt to justify that it captures how we *actually* interpret these phrases.

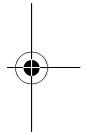
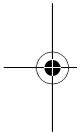
Like almost all philosophers who come to language from logic, Russell was highly suspicious of the possibility of providing a coherent and precise semantics for ordinary language. Ambiguity, vagueness, and most importantly the paradoxes suggested to him that the vernacular is unsuited for the purposes of philosophy, and is at the very least in need of a thoroughgoing reform. He regularly describes language as dismally imperfect and bypasses the perceived imperfections by sheer postulation. The attitude is well illustrated by his comments about tense in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*:³⁰

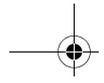
The occurrence of tense in verbs is an exceedingly annoying vulgarity due to our preoccupation with practical affairs. It would be much more agreeable if they had no tense, as I believe is the case in Chinese, but I do not know Chinese. You ought to be able to say 'Socrates exists in the past', 'Socrates exists in the present' or 'Socrates exists in the future', or simply 'Socrates exists', without any implication of tense, but language does not allow that, unfortunately. Nevertheless, I am going to use language in this tenseless way: when I say 'The so-and-so exists', I am not going to mean that it exists in the

²⁸ Russell (1905), p. 54.

²⁹ Unlike 'the sun-god', 'Apollo' is rigid designator. Unlike 'the number which multiplied by 0 gives 4', '4/0' is a *de jure* rigid designator.

³⁰ Russell (1918), p. 248.





present or in the past or in the future, but simply that it exists, without implying anything involving tense.

Tense-marking on verbs is an inescapable feature of English grammar. Russell thinks the feature unfortunate, for although there *are* tenseless propositions they remain inexpressible in English: whenever we say something—even something like ‘The solution to the equation $x^2 - 4x + 4$ exists’—our sentence carries a temporal entailment. Fortunately, language will bend to our will: we can just say that we will use English sentences without implying anything about time, and saying so makes it so.

Most contemporary semanticists would give more of a run for the view that tense is present but covertly marked in Chinese and would be sceptical of the idea that grammar is significantly shaped by the practical concerns of our ancestors. But what is most glaring about the quote is Russell’s complete lack of interest in language itself. He wants to discuss reality quite independently of any linguistic garb; once he thinks he succeeded in focusing his reader’s mind on the proposition he has no further concern for the sentence. He does not plead for a special, tenseless use of apparently present tense verbs, like ‘exist’ – he simply postulates such a use and wastes no time to persuade us that the postulation tracks some interesting feature of English.

This, I think, is Russell’s persistent attitude to matters of language. However, it is widely assumed that he took a different stance when it came to descriptions. The theory of descriptions is supposed to tell us something important about what descriptions actually mean, not what they should mean by Russell’s stipulation. According to the theory in ‘On Denoting’, (9) ‘becomes’ (9’):

(9) The present king of France is bald.

(9’) It is sometimes true of x that x is now king of France, and that x is bald, and

that it is always true of y that if y is now king of France, y is identical with x .³¹

³¹ Russell (1905): 44. Here Russell says the following:

(*) Thus ‘the father of Charles II was executed’ becomes ‘It is not always false of x that x begat Charles II and that x was executed and that “if y begat Charles II, y is identical with x ” is always true of y .’

I have adopted Russell’s terminology with trivial changes, except for the elimination of double quotes. I take it that according to Russell’s intentions, the double quotes are used to refer to the propositional function expressed by the words between them. I assume for the sake of presentation

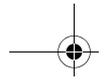


What exactly is the relation between (9) and (9'), according to Russell? The usual gloss is that former is analysed by the latter, in the sense that their shared *logical form* is significantly better approximated by the *grammatical form* of the latter. By grammatical form Russell means what everyone else does: the syntactic structure of the sentence which comprises whatever non-lexical information goes into sentence individuation. Grammatical form encodes the order of lexical items; 'Cromwell defeated Charles II' and 'Charles II defeated Cromwell' are distinct sentences despite containing the same words. But grammatical form encodes much more: although we often say that 'Charles II greeted the woman with a smile' is an ambiguous sentence, it is more plausible to think that we are faced here with ambiguous reference to two sentences distinguished by their grammatical forms. Although occasionally non-trivial to discern, grammatical form is much less hidden than logical form. On Russell's view, sentences bear logical relations not intrinsically but in virtue of their meanings. And sentences are meaningful because they express propositions; indeed, their meanings *are* the propositions they express. But not everything about a proposition is relevant to logic. 'Charles I was executed' and 'Charles II was defeated' certainly express different propositions and have different inferential powers. Nonetheless, they participate in analogous patterns of valid inference, and so from the perspective of pure logic they are indistinguishable.³² According to Russell, the feature that comprises everything pure logic cares about is the structure of the proposition,

that the complementizer 'that' followed by the same words refers to the same thing. If this assumption is rejected, Russell's own formulation must be deemed incorrect—note the three occurrences of 'that' within (*). The line could be rephrased without the complementizer, relying on a nested occurrence of double quotes:

(**) Thus 'the father of Charles II was executed' becomes ' "x begat Charles II and x was executed and "if y begat Charles II, y is identical with x" is always true of y" is not always false of x.'

³²In what sense do they participate in analogous inferences? In the sense that any valid inference remains valid if we substitute 'Charles II' for all occurrences of 'Charles I' and *vice versa*, and 'defeat' for all occurrences of 'execute' and *vice versa*. (Note that such a replacement may involve certain adjustments. For example, in 'Charles I was executed and Charles I was a king; therefore there was an executed king' we would need to replace 'an' by 'a'.) A sensible sufficient condition for sameness of logical form might then be this: two expressions ε and ε' have the same logical form if there are (possibly complex) expressions $\varepsilon_1, \dots, \varepsilon_n$ which syntactically make up ε and expressions $\varepsilon'_1, \dots, \varepsilon'_n$ which syntactically make up ε' , and for every $1 \leq i \leq n$ substituting each ε_i for ε'_i ; and *vice versa* everywhere in an argument preserves the argument's validity. (This would be undesirably strong as a necessary condition: we don't want to say that 'There were kings' and 'There were some kings' must have different logical forms just because substituting 'kings' for 'some kings' in 'Charles II is a king who never got executed, and so is Louis XIV; therefore some kings never got executed' turns a valid inference into an invalid one.)



which he also identifies with the logical form of any sentence that expresses that proposition.³³ The claim that (9) and (9') share a single logical form means that they participate in analogous patterns of inference; this together with the fact that both propositions are built from the universals of being the present king of France and being bald guarantee their logical equivalence.

If Russell is committed to the logical equivalence of (9) and (9'), he certainly commits himself to a substantive claim about the actual meaning of (9). But he is not so committed. The claim that (9) 'becomes' (9') is immediately preceded by the caveat mentioned in the previous section: although the definite article is frequently used differently 'for our purposes we take *the* as involving uniqueness'.³⁴ Russell says that these sentences are logically equivalent *if* (9) is used strictly and he does not say what it is to use a description strictly. Russell remarks that it would be 'more correct' to use descriptions strictly but we are not told where this norm is coming from. If it is a norm that guides speakers in their everyday talk, Russell's theory of descriptions may be empirically significant. If it is a norm that guides philosophers who wish to wipe out 'deficient' features from everyday language it is probably not.

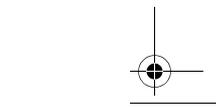
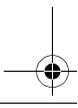
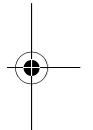
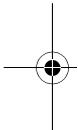
As far as I can tell, there is nothing in 'On Denoting' that would decide this question. Russell's subsequent comments, however, seem to favour the view that regards the theory a lot more stipulative than descriptive. Responding to Strawson's claims that he ignored important features of our actual use of descriptions, Russell claims to have never been concerned with ordinary language as such, expresses agreement with Strawson's contention that 'ordinary language has no exact logic', and characterizes his theory of descriptions as a proposal for a 'linguistic novelty', for a 'modification of common speech'.³⁵ All this suggests that the theory of descriptions in 'On Denoting' is no less stipulative than the theory of tense in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*.

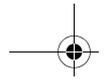
What is the methodology that leads Russell to introduce his interpretation for definite descriptions? He is far from being explicit, but the following remarks might give us a clue:

³³ By the time of *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* Russell came to reject propositions as entities built from objects, properties, and relations but kept the talk of logical form. Logical form remains for him a feature of an expression which encodes its pure logical inferential properties.

³⁴ Russell (1905), p. 44.

³⁵ Russell (1957), p. 387–9.

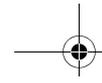




My theory of descriptions was never intended as an analysis of the state of mind of those who utter sentences containing descriptions. Mr. Strawson gives the name 'S' to the sentence 'The king of France is wise', and says of me 'The way in which he arrived at the analysis was clearly by asking himself what be the circumstances in which we would say that anyone who uttered the sentence S had made a true assertion'. This does not seem to me a correct account of what I was doing. Suppose (which God forbid) Mr. Strawson were so rash as to accuse his char-lady of thieving: she would reply indignantly, 'I ain't never done no harm to no one'. Assuming her a pattern of virtue, I should say that she was making a true assertion, although, according to the rules of syntax which Mr. Strawson would adopt in his own speech, what she said should have meant: 'there was at least one moment when I was injuring the whole human race'. Mr. Strawson would not have supposed that this was what she meant to assert, although he would not have used her words to express the same sentiment. Similarly, I was concerned to find a more accurate and analysed thought to replace the somewhat confused thoughts which most people at most times have in their heads.

The passage begins with a sentence where Russell appears to make the point that has become the core of the standard response to Strawson: that the theory of descriptions is *not* about speaker meaning. What a sentence containing a description means is sometimes different from what a speaker meant in uttering it, and Russell's theory concerns the former, not the latter. The example can also be taken to illustrate the distinction: it shows that the concern of a semantic theory is what the charlady's sentence means in Standard English (something blatantly false) not what she meant (something arguably true). What is decisively odd is how the passage ends: the word 'similarly' in the last sentence suggests that interpreting the charlady's sentence involves finding 'a more accurate and analysed thought to replace the somewhat confused thoughts' she had in her head. But why think the charlady has confused thoughts in the first place?

No contemporary semanticist would find the charlady's utterance a sign of confusion. She is certainly not confused about the facts, and she doesn't seem confused about what her words mean either. The charlady speaks the general working-class Southern British variety of English, of which a well-known dialect is Cockney. In Cockney, her sentence means that she never did any harm to anyone, which is—we might presume—just what she meant in making her utterance. The reason Strawson would refrain from using her words to voice the same sentiment has nothing to do with confusion on her part: it is simply



that Standard English (unlike Cockney, or many Romance and Slavic languages) lacks negative concord.³⁶

Why does Russell not see the situation this way? It is possible that he thinks Queen's English is superior to Cockney, at least when it comes to negation, but I doubt that this is the right reading of the passage. He is much too careful to talk about 'the rules of syntax which Mr. Strawson would adopt in his own speech' not about the *correct* rules of English. What Russell rejects is not our egalitarian attitude towards the dialects—it is rather the shiftiness of our stance. Most of the time, we treat dialects as different versions of the same language: we are happy to say that the charlady and Strawson both speak English. But when it comes to details, like negative concord, we start speaking as if dialects were distinct albeit similar languages, each with its own grammar. Russell refuses to play along; for him dialects are always equally compelling versions of the same language. It is a single language, English, that both allows and forbids negative concord, which means that English has no coherent syntax or semantics. This particular incoherence may be easily kept under control: the charlady and Mr Strawson tend to stick to their own versions of English. Nonetheless, they are aware of the conflicting rules and even tacitly acknowledge them in interpreting each other. This opens up the possibility of genuine confusion, confusion we are *all* prone to simply in virtue of speaking a natural language.

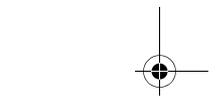
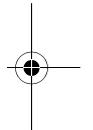
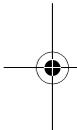
In the *Principles of Mathematics* Russell says mathematicians had been confused about the continuum for centuries, then came Cantor, gave a surprising definition and thereby uncovered a notion that was 'presupposed in existing mathematics, though it was not known exactly what it was that was presupposed'.³⁷ In general, the aim of definitions is not to match precisely what people mean by certain expressions but to uncover 'ideas which, more or less unconsciously, are implied in the ordinary employment of the term'.³⁸ This is, I suspect, exactly the way Russell thought about the accomplishments of his own contextual definitions in 'On Denoting'. He gave what he thought a 'somewhat incredible interpretation',³⁹ which does not lead to contradiction and resolves some difficulties concerning definite descriptions and opaque contexts, the law of excluded middle, and denials of existence. From his own

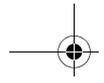
³⁶ Negative concord is a syntactic feature of a language where in negative clauses indefinites as well as expressions such as 'any' are replaced by their negative equivalents. For a survey of the literature and a bibliography, see Ladusaw (1996).

³⁷ Russell (1903), sect. 335.

³⁸ Russell (1903), sect. 2.

³⁹ Russell (1905), p. 44.





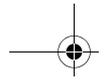
experience he knew that this is no small feat, and the success suggested to him that the interpretation he found might be what provides the *rational basis* for our confused thoughts whose verbal expression involves descriptions.

Russell's assessment of the merits of his own theory would be hard to accept. It is compelling to say that there is a rational basis for much of the confused thought and talk about the continuum that mathematicians had been engaged in since antiquity. It is also plausible that Cantor came close to capturing this rational basis through a precise definition. But it is hard to believe that all our thinking whose verbal expression involves descriptions is confused—it would imply that pretty much *all* our thinking is confused. I am not saying that theories about descriptions before Russell couldn't have been as confused as theories about the continuum before Cantor. It is rather that understanding 'the' and 'a(n)' is part of the basic linguistic competence of English speakers, while understanding 'continuum' is not. We need a good grasp of the interpretation of the articles to talk about anything, even if our explicit theories about what we are grasping are dead wrong. This is not so for words like 'continuum.'

Russell thought of the theory of descriptions as a useful stipulation that uncovers the rational basis in our confused use of the articles. We should set Russell's self-assessment aside and look at his theory of description as an accidental contribution to the semantics of natural language. The question is whether the theory thus construed will stand on its merits. Once we make the shift of perspective, we are no longer entitled to Russell's dismissive attitude towards evidence that his theory does not accord with ordinary linguistic intuitions. The troubling intuitions can perhaps be explained away, but they cannot be neglected.

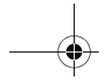
3.

When trying to cast a theory in a mould that differs substantially from what its author had in mind, it is useful to set some minimal standards of fit. How much of what Russell says about descriptions in 'On Denoting' do we need to preserve in order to legitimately count the resulting view as *Russellian*? The common practice these days is to focus on truth-conditions. Semantic theories dealing with a fragment of a natural language are called Russellian if they agree with the theory of 'On Denoting' about circumstances in which sentences containing descriptions would be true or false.



Actually the standard is somewhat looser. Russell claims to have given a *complete* reduction of sentences with descriptions to sentences without such expressions, but to make the reduction work we need bold and implausible assumptions about predicates. For example, to capture the generic reading of ‘The humpback whale eats plankton,’ we need a predicate ‘humpback whale’ true of nothing but the species *Megaptera novaengliae* and a predicate ‘eats plankton’ true of species, rather than individual animals. These are not the usual interpretations of these predicates—if they were the sentence ‘There is just one humpback whale in the whole world’ should ring true and ‘My pet fish at home eats plankton’ should ring like a category mistake. Or consider plural and mass nouns. If the Russellian theory is correct across the board, the truth of ‘The dolphins were following the boat’ requires that ‘dolphins’ be true of a single thing (perhaps constituted by the contextually relevant dolphins) and the truth of ‘The water was turbulent’ requires that ‘water’ be true of a single thing (perhaps constituted by the contextually relevant portion of water). Again, it seems clear that in their normal interpretations ‘dolphins’ and ‘water’ don’t have singleton extensions. It seems unlikely that the best semantics for generics, plurals, and mass terms will include such expansive commitment to ambiguities—the usual assumption is that the Russellian theory itself needs some adjustment. In any case, semantic theories count broadly Russellian even if they reject the application of Russell’s theory for these cases; what matters is to give Russellian truth-conditions for the relatively straightforward sentences Russell considered.

The choice of truth-conditions as prime characteristics of what makes a theory Russellian is anything but obvious. The theory of ‘On Denoting’ is committed to a realist conception of meaning: sentences mean propositions built up from objects, properties, and relations. It is these propositions that are the bearers of truth or falsity in the first place; sentences have truth-values only derivatively. It is understandable that contemporary semanticists want to detach Russell’s views on descriptions from the particular background theory within which he chooses to present it. A lot of this background is surely inessential to what Russell is up to: although by the time of the *Principia Mathematica* he abandons his commitment to propositions, he does not say that the theory of descriptions is in need of revision. But if we are willing to abstract away from the particular mechanism through which Russell thinks sentences containing descriptions come to have their truth-conditions, we should also ask whether there are aspects of the truth-conditions themselves that are explanatorily idle.



What drew Russell to his 1905 view on descriptions is a complex and contentious question. To answer it, we would need to take a close look at the view advocated in *The Principles of Mathematics*, at the papers written during the intermediary period of 1903–5, as well as the arguments in the *Gray's Elegy* passages of 'On Denoting'. I do not intend to do that here. What Russell emphasizes in 'On Denoting'—whether or not this was in fact the driving force that brought him to the new view—is the curious tendency of definite descriptions to lure us into absurd conclusions; like that France is still a monarchy:

The present king of France is bald or the present king of France is not bald.

If the present king of France is bald, the present king of France exists.

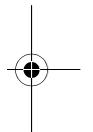
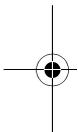
If the present king of France is not bald, the present king of France exists.

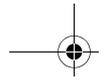
Therefore

The present king of France exists.

This argument is strangely appealing. So much so, that some philosophers have actually accepted its conclusion—usually with the caveat that His Majesty is unreal—while others felt the need to deny the first premiss, and hence, abandon bivalence. Both of these seem desperate measures. Russell's way out of the bind is to plea that the argument equivocates: the clause 'the present king of France is not bald' is ambiguous and the premisses come out true only if we read it in two different ways. If negation is given wide scope over the description the first premise is true but the third false, if the scopes are reversed the third is true but the first is false.

The puzzle about the present king of France is one of three Russell singles out in 'On Denoting'. The other two are the question how George IV could possibly have wondered whether Scott was the author of *Waverley* and how the difference between *A* and *B* could fail to exist. The solutions to these problems are also based on scope. The most natural (and allegedly true) reading of 'George IV wondered whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*' involves the description taking narrow scope with regard to the propositional attitude verb. This reading does not entail the other reading ('the author of *Waverley* is such that George IV wondered whether Scott was him'), which is false. 'The difference between *A* and *B* does not exist' is also ambiguous, and it is contradictory only if the definite description scopes over the negation. The other





reading is true just in case *A* and *B* fail to differ. There is more to these puzzles, for the semantics of ‘wonder’ and ‘exist’ bring in extra complications—nonetheless, the heart of the solution in each case is the recognition that definite descriptions bear scope.

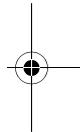
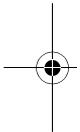
Russell says that his theory could be tested by its capacity to deal with these three puzzles; they are the ones any good theory about descriptions ‘ought to be able to solve’.⁴⁰ This suggests a clean minimal criterion for being a Russellian semantics: the theory must solve these puzzles the way Russell solved them. To do that a theory must meet just two criteria: (i) definite descriptions must exhibit scope ambiguity with regard to negation and propositional attitude verbs, and (ii) the reading where the description takes narrow scope should not entail the reading where it takes wide scope. Call a semantic theory that meets these two criteria *minimally Russellian*.

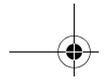
The first of these criteria says *nothing* about truth-conditions. Whether we will be *prima facie* inclined to posit an ambiguity of scope in a particular case does depend, of course, on there being truth-conditionally discernible readings to capture, but simplicity and uniformity may convince us of the presence of scope ambiguity even if the readings are equivalent. The second criterion *does* constrain the truth-conditional import of ‘the’, but only marginally. We can’t have ‘the’ mean the same as ‘most’ (since if it is not the case that most *F*’s are *G*’s then it follows that most *F*’s fail to be *G*’s) but it could mean the same as ‘some’, ‘every’, or even ‘five’. Russell’s explanation why the argument to the conclusion that France still has a king is a fallacy would go through under these absurd interpretations of the definite article without any change whatsoever.

To say that the three puzzles arise because definite descriptions are scope-bearing elements is a rather shallow explanation. A deeper analysis would have to account for *why* descriptions are assigned scope in the first place. Russell does have such a deeper explanation: his proposal is that descriptions are scope-bearing elements because they are *incomplete symbols*. To appreciate the explanation, we need to take a step back and see why scope is problematic in the first place.

Start from the simplest realist semantics, a view the early Russell would no doubt have found attractive. Assume that what it is for an expression to be meaningful is for it to stand in the *meaning-of* relation to its meaning, that the meanings of complex expressions are literally built up from the meanings of its parts, and that the way simpler meanings compose into more complex ones tracks the way the expressions

⁴⁰ Russell (1905), p. 47.





that have those simpler meanings compose into expressions that have those more complex meanings. Sentential meanings are structured entities—propositions—made up of the meanings of words, and the structure of a proposition mirrors the grammatical structure of any sentence that has that proposition for its meaning.

This view runs into difficulties very quickly. Consider (10):

- (10) Every charming sans-culotte cheered the beheading of an old aristocrat.

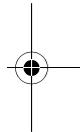
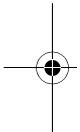
(10) seems ambiguous: it can express a proposition that allows different charming sans-culottes to have cheered the beheading of different old aristocrats or a proposition that requires that they all have cheered the beheading of the same old aristocrat. At the same time, it appears that (10) has a single grammatical structure: ‘every charming sans-culotte’ is the subject, ‘cheered the beheading of an old aristocrat’ the predicate, within the predicate ‘the beheading of an old aristocrat’ is the object. Some of the words within the sentence may well be ambiguous, but there seems to be no chance to trace the ambiguity of (10) to what dictionaries can tell us about the different meanings of ‘charming’, ‘cheered’ or ‘old’. If so, one of the two propositions expressed by (10) cannot be simply built up from the lexical meanings of words within (10) in a fashion that mirrors the grammatical structure of this sentence.

The trouble has not much to do with the realism of the proposed semantics. It is fundamentally a conflict between ordinary linguistic intuitions and the principle of compositionality. If the meanings of English sentences are *determined* by the way their constituents are put together and by the meanings of those constituents then a syntactically and lexically unambiguous sentence must have just one meaning.

Linguists and a few philosophers tend to resolve this difficulty by giving up on some ordinary intuitions. Some deny that (10) is ambiguous—they think that it has a unitary meaning that is underspecified with respect to the scope relations of the quantifying phrases.⁴¹ Some deny that (10) has a single syntactic structure—they think that the reading where the object takes scope over the subject is generated through movement that remains invisible on the surface.⁴² And some deny that (10) is free of all relevant lexical ambiguities—they explain the scope

⁴¹ Cf. Kempson and Cormack (1981) and Bach (1982).

⁴² Cf. May (1977) and Heim and Kratzer (1998).





possibilities of (10) by assigning multiple (but systematically related) meanings of different types to both the subject and the object.⁴³

Many philosophers tend to be less flexible about intuitions, so they might want a different solution. There is a simple one Russell suggested—it involves a substantial weakening of compositionality. Instead of saying that for each complex expression ε , the meanings of ε 's constituents together with the way those constituents are combined determine the meaning of ε , say only that for each complex expression ε , the meanings of ε 's constituents, *if they all exist*, together with the way those constituents are combined determine the meaning of ε . When it comes to (10), we can deny that 'every charming sans-culotte' has a meaning and we have no violation of this weaker notion of compositionality.⁴⁴

Once we deny the meaningfulness of 'every charming sans-culotte' and 'an old aristocrat', the question arises how sentences in which these meaningless expressions occur manage to be meaningful. Russell's response is that we associate certain rules with incomplete symbols and these rules specify what the meaning of larger complete symbols is in which they occur as constituents. Whenever we have more than one incomplete symbol in a sentence, there is a question about the order of applying these rules, and depending on this order we may get different meanings. This is Russell's account of scope.⁴⁵

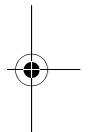
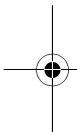
⁴³ Cf. Cooper (1975) and Hendriks (1993).

⁴⁴ Isn't this weaker construal of compositionality trivial? It depends on *which* constituents of a complex expression the principle is taken to quantify over. Consider:

- (*) For every complex expression ε , the meanings of ε 's *immediate* constituents, *if they all exist*, together with the way those constituents are combined determine the meaning of ε .
- (**) For every complex expression ε , the meanings of ε 's *primitive* constituents, *if they all exist*, together with the way those constituents are combined determine the meaning of ε .

(ε is an immediate constituent of ε' iff ε is a constituent of ε' and ε' has no constituent of which ε is a constituent. ε is a primitive constituent of ε' iff ε is a constituent of ε' and ε has no constituent.)
 (**) makes compositionality vacuous for all complex expressions that contain primitive components that lack meaning. Russell thinks 'every' and 'an' are incomplete symbols (he is not explicit, but would no doubt say the same about 'of'), so as far as (10) is concerned (**) is empty. (*), on the other hand, still has some bite: the meanings of 'charming' and 'sans-culotte' must determine the meaning of 'charming sans-culotte' and the meanings of 'old' and 'aristocrat' must determine the meaning of 'old aristocrat'. Note also that a theory like Russell's can preserve the spirit of a stronger compositionality by talking about the rules associated with incomplete expressions rather than their meanings.

⁴⁵ Years before 'On Denoting' Russell already believes that the meanings of denoting phrases are *unanalysable*, that words like 'all', 'every', 'any', 'some', 'a', or 'the' do not have a meaning but contribute to the meanings of larger expressions through associated rules; cf. Russell (1903), pp. 72–3. The novelty in 'On Denoting' is the idea that denoting phrases themselves lack meaning in isolation.



If we called a semantic theory which incorporates Russell's scope-based solutions to the three puzzles he raises in 'On Denoting' minimally Russellian, we should call theories that go along with him when it comes to the nature of scope *maximally Russellian*. The overwhelming majority of linguists and philosophers who call themselves Russellians about definite descriptions are not advocating a maximally Russellian semantics. It is fairly common practice these days to assign a genuine semantic value to quantifying phrases—as Montague showed, to say that 'every charming sans-culotte' expresses the property of being a property every charming sans-culotte has does not get into the way of accounting for scope-ambiguities.⁴⁶ And those who think this phrase by itself means *nothing* are surely not in a position to criticize such a semantics citing their intuitions that 'every charming sans-culotte' must mean something *other* than a property of properties. A theory that assigns semantic values to quantifying phrases can easily get Russellian truth-conditions for sentences in which these phrases occur.

There are also positive reasons for rejecting maximally Russellian theories. The theory in 'On Denoting' is applicable only to sentences where the quantifying phrase combines with a predicate to form a sentence. But combining with a predicate is not the only way quantifying phrases may enter into larger expressions. Consider, for example the sentence (11):

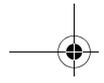
- (11) Some king or some queen was beheaded.

If we try to extract 'some king' from (11), the remainder is not an expression of English. Any straightforward way to assign truth-conditions to (11)—and to all the infinitely many complex phrases which contain Boolean combinations of quantifying phrases—requires that we assign semantic values to the quantifiers and explain how the semantic values of the complex phrases are determined by the semantic values of their components. The alternative is to claim that the syntactic structure of (11) is that of (12)

- (12) Some king was beheaded or some queen was beheaded.

But this makes a mess of English grammar. There is really no good reason to think that the grammatical structure of (11) is anything but what it seems to be: 'some king or some queen' is the subject, 'was beheaded' the predicate. Russell often said that the grammatical structure of sen-

⁴⁶ Of course, to remain compositional such a theory must deny either that (10) has a single syntactic structure, or that all its lexical items are unambiguous. Montague denied the former; some of his followers denied the latter.



tences is misleading as to what their logical form is. This may be so. But he never suggested that we should think of ourselves as being easily misled regarding the grammatical structure itself. He took it for granted that if an expression seems to be the subject of a sentence in the lights of the best syntactic evidence, it most likely is. I suggest that we should all exercise Russellian humility when it comes to grammar. If we do, sentences like (11) give us excellent reason to abandon the idea that quantifying phrases are incomplete symbols.

To sum up, there is no good reason to abide by the current practice of calling semantic theories Russellian just in case they assign Russellian truth-conditions. This is because no one thinks Russellian truth-conditions are adequate when it comes generic or plural definite descriptions and, more importantly, because these truth-conditions do no explanatorily work in 'On Denoting', or in Russell's subsequent writings. We could call a semantic theory weakly Russellian if it can give the exact same explanation Russell gave for the three puzzle cases in 'On Denoting', which essentially boils down to allowing scope-interactions between definite descriptions and other scope-bearing elements. In this sense the majority of linguists and philosophers are Russellians. We could call a semantic theory strongly Russellian if it subscribes to Russell's view about the source of scope ambiguities, that is, if it does not assign semantic values to definite descriptions in isolation. In this sense the majority of linguists and philosophers are not Russellians. But whether we want to be Russellians in either sense has nothing to do with the question whether sentences containing definite descriptions have uniqueness entailments.

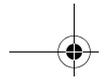
4.

Deciding between competing theories is always a contentious matter. We tend to believe that, other things being equal, the theory that is more comprehensive in its coverage of the data, more parsimonious in its explanations, and more conservative in its assumptions is the better one. But in all the interesting cases it is matter of fierce controversy how to measure comprehensiveness, parsimony, or conservativeness, and how to adjudicate among them when they are in conflict. When it comes to semantics, the situation is a lot worse than usual. Not only are we uncertain what counts as the better theory, we lack agreement about which theories are good enough. We have no consensus on what the relevant data are, what counts as an explanation, and which traditional assumptions are worth taking seriously.

Among the controversial but reasonable demands on a theory of meaning is that it must account for the *point* of having various sorts of expressions in a language, that it must tell us what those expressions are *for*. The demand is often trivial—it is hardly surprising to say that the point of having the word ‘table’ in English is to have a predicate that applies to all and only tables, and that without such a predicate we would find it hard to talk about tables. But when it comes to more interesting words such explanations often ring hollow. It is, for example, not enough to say that the truth predicate is for talking about truths because it is not immediately clear why one would want to do that. If in uttering ‘Snow is white’ and “‘Snow is white’ is true’ we assert the exact the same thing, talk about truths appears redundant. To appreciate what ‘true’ is for we need to focus on other sentences—like ‘Everything Russell ever said is true’, ‘True premisses never entail false conclusions’, or ‘This sentence is true’—and we need to find an illuminating way to express what the truth predicate is doing in these. Hopefully we can revisit then “‘Snow is white’ is true’ and realize that, far from being idle, ‘true’ does the same thing in that sentence as well. If so, we will be on our way to a substantial account of the point of the truth predicate.

In asking what something is for we expect an explanation of its function. Such explanations are hardly ever self-standing when it comes to the functions of parts within complex wholes—there is no sensible way to tell what a small cogwheel in an old clock is for without specifying its role in the working of the clock. A sensible way to approach this sort of task is to ask how the whole would be impaired if the relevant part was removed. Similarly, we can approach the question what certain linguistic expressions are for by asking how the language as whole would be impoverished if it did not contain those expressions.

So what is the point of having the definite article in English? Russell does not address this issue, which should not be surprising, given that he was not interested in English at all. But Russellians, when they applied his theory to natural language, latched onto some of his claims and extracted a doctrine from his writings. The doctrine is that the definite article is primarily for building definite descriptions, and that the point of those is in some way analogous, but also importantly different from the point of proper names. While proper names are for *referring* to objects, definite descriptions are for *denoting* them. Pretending that ‘Scott’ is a genuine proper name—Russell, of course denied this, but for expository purposes he was happy to engage in this pretence—the doctrine entails that ‘The author of *Waverley* is mortal’ is not *about* Sir



Walter Scott in the same sense as 'Scott is mortal' is. Call this the *Russellian doctrine*.

Russell thought the difference between the functions of proper names and definite descriptions is so subtle that we often confuse the two. The source of our troubles is that we are taken in by grammar. Here is a characteristic passage from *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*:⁴⁷

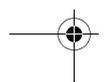
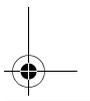
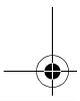
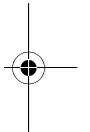
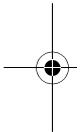
There are great many sorts of incomplete symbols in logic, and they are sources of a great deal of confusion and false philosophy, because people get misled by grammar. You think that the proposition 'Scott is mortal' and the proposition 'The author of *Waverley* is mortal' are of the same form. You think that they are both simple propositions attributing a predicate to a subject. That is an entire delusion: one of them is (or rather might be) and one of them is not. These things, like 'the author of *Waverley*', which I call incomplete symbols, are things that have absolutely no meaning whatsoever in isolation but merely acquire one in a context. 'Scott' taken as a name has a meaning all by itself. It stands for a certain person, and there it is. But 'the author of *Waverley*' is not a name, and does not all by itself mean anything at all, because when it is rightly used in propositions, those propositions do not contain any constituent corresponding to it.

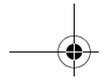
This passage is puzzling both for superficial and deep reasons. The superficial reasons are connected to the fact that it is from 1918, when Russell no longer believes in what we now call (and what he used to call earlier) propositions. Not only that, he actually uses the word 'proposition' to talk about what we call (and what he used to call) sentences.⁴⁸ Accordingly, the passage makes the surprising claim that the *sentence* 'The author of *Waverley* is mortal' does not have subject/predicate form and does not contain a constituent corresponding to the description. The claims become less odd if we take him to say that the *logical* form of the sentence is not subject/predicate (although its grammatical form is) and that the *logical analysis* of the sentence contains no constituent corresponding to the description (while the verbal expression of the sentence surely contains the description as a grammatical constituent). Once we make these adjustments, we can recognize the doctrine of incomplete symbols from 'On Denoting' in the passage.

What is deeply puzzling is how Russell thought the doctrine may explain our confusion about definite descriptions. It is clear how someone who failed to recognize that a certain symbol is incomplete might

⁴⁷ Russell (1918).

⁴⁸ Cf. Russell (1918), pp. 185.



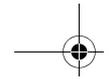


get confused about what sort of proposition the sentence expresses, and also that this may lead to logical error. But according to Russell's theory, 'an author of *Waverley*', 'every author of *Waverley*', and even 'no author of *Waverley*' are *all* incomplete symbols. They have no meaning in themselves, and the meaning of sentences in which they occur is given through a contextual definition. Still, we do not tend to get confused about these the way we do about definite descriptions. When Alice says to the white King that she sees nobody on the road, the white King responds: 'I only wish *I* had such eyes. To be able to see Nobody! And at the distance too! Why, it's as much as *I* can do to see real people, by this light!' All this was lost on Alice, not being much given to metaphysics. But even Russell's Meinong (let alone the real one) would be unlikely to take this as anything but a jest. Although 'nobody' bears considerable grammatical similarity to a proper name (because it can almost always be substituted for a proper name *salva beneformatione*), we feel no genuine inclination to treat it as one when it comes to logic. Russell's claim that *grammar* makes us think that singular definite descriptions behave just like names lacks all plausibility. It is a pity it is so often repeated.

This brings out clearly the way in which the Russellian doctrine about what definite descriptions are for is seriously incomplete. One might agree that definite descriptions are denoting expressions—that is, in our contemporary terminology, that they are quantifying phrases—and still wonder what distinguishes them among all the others that have this *kind* of function. What we are given is nothing more than the specific Russellian truth-conditions: 'the' differs from 'some', 'every', or 'no' in terms of the way it contributes to the truth or falsity of the proposition expressed by a sentence in which it occurs, and in no other semantically relevant way. Call this the *strengthened Russellian doctrine*.

According to Russellian doctrine, English would be crippled if we eliminated all denoting expressions from it: it would no longer contain the resources to express generalizations of any sort. According to the strengthened Russellian doctrine, if we dropped the definite article only, English would remain essentially the same language. 'The' is one of many devices of quantification, definable in terms of others. Its function is to allow us to express in a subject predicate form propositions whose underlying structure is quite different. It is like a cogwheel in the old clock placed behind a transparent glass for decoration—remove it and the clock might sell for less, but it will work just as well as it did before.

This view is fairly widespread among philosophers of language. I think it is fundamentally mistaken. The mistake is obvious if the argu-



ment in the first section of this paper is sound, if there really is no truth-conditional difference between indefinite and definite descriptions. Nobody can maintain that these expressions have the same function in English—try to switch the indefinite and definite articles on a page and see the meaning of the text change, sometimes into sheer nonsense. Defenders of uniqueness use pragmatic explanations based on the presence or absence of contextually fine-tuned uniqueness implications to account for all that, explanations like those I hinted at the beginning of the paper. But if uniqueness is lost, so are all those explanations.

The problem with uniqueness is just the tip of the iceberg. It brings out with particular lucidity the defects in Russellian thinking about anaphoric relations among descriptions. If descriptions are ordinary quantifiers, the fact that any competent speaker of English would take ‘the king’ in the second sentence of (13) to be satisfied by someone who walked in must be explained by claiming that all the kings within the domain of that description are kings who walked in. This idea is supported by the fact that (14a) sounds markedly odd—one might say that the source of the oddity is that due to the restriction of the domain the second sentence expresses a necessary falsehood. But this story wildly overgenerates; applying the same principles of domain restriction we would predict that the second sentences of (14b) and (14c) also express necessary falsehoods, which is not the case. *If* definite descriptions are ordinary quantifying phrases, they still behave in an extraordinary fashion when it comes to domain restriction.

- (13) A king walked in. The king was bald.
- (14a) A king walked in. The king was bald and so old that he could not walk.
- (14b) A king walked in. Some king was bald and so old he could not walk.
- (14c) A king walked in. Most kings were bald and so old they could not walk.

I find it hard to see how the contrast between (14a) on the one hand and (14b) and (14c) on the other could fail to be something pertaining to the meaning of the definite article, and even harder to see how one could concede this and still deny that it is something a theory of meaning must account for. This is not to say that the contrast has anything to do with the truth-conditions of these sentences. I believe it does not.

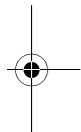
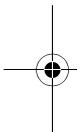


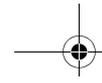
We can take the first step towards explaining the contrast by taking seriously what any decent dictionary tells us about the point of having descriptions in English.⁴⁹ The functions of indefinite and definite articles are complementary: the former is used to build phrases for introducing *novel* things into the discourse, the latter is used to build phrases for talking about things already *familiar*. This is why ‘the king’ in the second sentence of (14a) describes whomever ‘a king’ in the first sentence of (14a) does. Quantificational determiners, such as ‘some’ or ‘most’ have no discourse function similar to the definite article, which is why (14b) and (14c) are perfectly in order.

There are different ways to implement this intuitive idea. My preferred one involves the postulation of *files*, a level of semantically evaluable representations separate from logical form. Interpreting utterances involves, among other things, constructing and continuously updating a file that systematizes the information conveyed. Logical forms are constructed and interpreted by strict rules—files are built by a mixture of strict rules and heuristics, and incorporate our best guess about how the sentences hang together, what the various cross-sentential anaphoric relations are. The idea that indefinite descriptions introduce novel elements in the discourse and definite ones pick up previously introduced ones is cashed out in terms of the introduction of a new file card into the file versus the update of an old one. When constructing a file for an utterance of (14a) the addressee, *ceteris paribus*, first introduces a file card for the indefinite in the first sentence and ‘writes’ on it *walked in*, and then when filing the second sentence, she picks out the same file card and ‘writes’ *was bald* and *could not walk* on it. A file thus constructed cannot be true. (A file is true just in case it is satisfied by some sequence of individuals and no sequence can contain an individual who walked in and could not walk.) But this does not mean that (14a) itself is false. As I see it, how cross-sentential connections are to be taken is not part of the truth-conditions of this sequence of sentences. I think (14a) is true just in case some king walked in and some king was bald and so old that he could not walk.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Here are some quotes about ‘the’: ‘Marking an object as before mentioned or already known, or contextually particularized (e.g. “We keep a dog. We are all fond of *the* dog”): *Oxford English Dictionary*; ‘[U]sed as a function word to indicate that a following noun or noun equivalent is definite or has been previously specified by context or by circumstance’. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*; ‘[U]sed before somebody or something that has already been mentioned or identified, or something that is understood by both the speaker and hearer, as distinct from “a” or “an”’. *Encarta*. Note that not all dictionaries say something along these lines—for example, the entry of ‘the’ in *American Heritage Dictionary* is quite different.

⁵⁰ The key ideas and the terminology of the explanation just given are from Heim (1982). Unlike Heim, I do not consider files as alternative logical forms. In Szabó (2000) and Szabó (2003),





I will not try to defend this view here. My aim is simply to point out that there is a way of incorporating the dictionary view about the function of the indefinite and definite articles into a theory of meaning. The thought that ‘a’ and ‘the’ are devices of discourse coordination—even if they are also quantifiers⁵¹—is hard to quarrel with. The most regrettable feature of contemporary Russellian views about definite descriptions is not that they pay undue attention to the particular truth-conditions Russell assigned to sentences containing definite descriptions, or that these truth-conditions are mistaken. It is rather that by holding on to uniqueness, they keep the illusion alive that there is a way to explain the difference in meaning between indefinite and definite descriptions without talking about what these expressions are for.⁵²

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I argue that the uniqueness implications of definite descriptions are derivable from a small number of independently motivated principles concerning the filing of utterances. In other words, in many cases when we file an utterance of a sentence containing ‘the *F*’ the resulting file will entail that there is a unique *F* (within a contextually given domain). The sentence itself does not have such an entailment. For a different implementation of the idea that indefinite and definite articles differ fundamentally in their discourse function, see Ludlow and Segal (2004).

⁵¹ In Szabó (2000) I committed myself to the view that descriptions are quantifying phrases. I no longer think that this is clearly so—there is reason to think that they might be predicates; cf. Graff (2001). This question is completely independent of the status of uniqueness implications. If definite descriptions are predicates, I insist that (i) uniqueness is not built into their truth-conditional content, and (ii) the function of definite descriptions is different from the function of ordinary predicates.

⁵² I thank the participants of the discussion at the University College London, where I had the opportunity to present part of this material. Special thanks to Tamar Szabó Gendler, Michael Glanzberg, and Brian Weatherson for comments and discussion.

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