

The semantics of definite descriptions and identification*

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Introduction

Definite descriptions are expressions that are used to *identify* objects (as broadly construed as possible) by describing them as *unique instances of the properties expressed by the descriptions*.¹ For example, the definite description “the author of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*” can be used to identify Richard Wagner because it is Wagner who is the unique instance of the property of *being the author of Der Ring des Nibelungen*; the definite description “the first opera ever” is usually used to identify Jacopo Peri’s *Euridice* because *Euridice* is deemed to be the unique instance of the property of *being the first opera ever*; the definite description “the most famous fictitious Belgian detective” can be used to identify Hercule Poirot who is the unique instance of the property of *being the most famous fictitious Belgian detective*. As we can see, definite descriptions can be used to identify real persons, works of art and fictitious characters; and we may enlarge this list indefinitely – there are definite descriptions of places, of abstract entities such as numbers, of properties, of artefacts, of sets of individuals, of elementary particles, of biological species, of social institutions, etc. etc.

From the syntactic viewpoint, a definite description consists of the determiner “the” (the definite article) and a predicate expression such as “author

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1 When talking about the property expressed by a definite description “the *F*” (where “*F*” is a predicate) I mean the property of *being F* which is expressed by the predicate “*F*”.

of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*” or “first opera ever” or “most famous fictitious Belgian detective”, etc. Given their syntactic structure, definite descriptions belong to an indefinitely large set comprising the quantifier expressions such as “an *F*”, “every *F*”, “all *F*s”, “at least some *F*”, “exactly three *F*s”, “several *F*s”, “at least one but at most ten *F*s”, “no *F*”, “most *F*s”, “both *F*s”, etc. (where “*F*” is a predicate).

Thus, there are two important facts to be recognized in the case of definite descriptions: 1) that they are often used to identify objects and 2) that they are quantifier expressions from the syntactic viewpoint. Apparently, points 1) and 2) may create a kind of tension. The reason is that point 1) indicates that definite descriptions can be taken as semantically referential expressions, while point 2) suggests that they should semantically behave as other quantifier expressions, i.e., non-referentially. Such a tension can be overcome provided one of the facts is given priority over the other one.

One of the most influential semantic theories of definite descriptions highlights the fact that definite descriptions are quantifier expressions. According to Bertrand Russell, definite descriptions are quantifier expressions and behave in the same way as other quantifier expressions. Putting the details of his formal theory aside, Russell views the sentences involving definite descriptions of the form “The *F* is *G*” as expressing three pieces of information: a) that there is at least one individual that is *F*; b) that there is at most one individual that is *F*; and c) that any individual that is *F* is *G* as well.² The sentence of the form “The *F* is *G*” is said to express the conjunction of the three pieces of information. As a result, it is true provided all three conjuncts are true; alternatively, it is false provided at least one of the conjuncts is false as well. In particular, the sentence of the form “The *F* is *G*” is false provided 1) there are more individuals that are *F* or 2) there is no individual that is *F* or 3) there is a unique individual that is *F*, which is not *G*.

According to Russell’s theory, definite descriptions are quantifier expressions. If a sentence involves a quantifier expression as its noun phrase, I say

² The first formulation of Russell’s theory can be found in Russell 1905; a formal theory of definite descriptions appears in Whitehead – Russell 1910. Russell’s theory has been extensively discussed – both sympathetically and critically – for more than one century and thus there is vast literature about it.

that its truth-conditions are *general*.³ On the other hand, if a sentence involves a referential expression, its truth-conditions are *singular* because they involve, as their constituent part, the individual referred to.⁴ Given that definite descriptions are supposed to be quantifier expressions, the sentences involving definite descriptions have general truth-conditions.

The argument from identification

It might be objected that when we take definite descriptions as quantifier expressions we suppress the other fact that is true of them, namely the one concerning their identification role. It can easily be observed that being an identification device is perhaps the most important role definite descriptions have in communication. Since the same communication role is also played by proper names, personal pronouns or demonstratives, definite descriptions should be taken on a par with these kinds of expression.⁵ It is widely accepted that sentences with proper names or personal pronouns as their constituents have singular truth-conditions. And if we compare definite descriptions to the expressions of these kinds, the truth-conditions of the sentences involving definite descriptions should be singular as well. Since Russell's theory suggests that the sentences involving definite descriptions are quantificational, the identification role of definite descriptions cannot be captured by it. Or so it might be argued.

Let us label this kind of reasoning *the argument from identification*.⁶ The argument can be formulated, in a more rigorous manner, in the following way:

- 1) It is an empirical datum easily recognized in everyday communication that the definite description "the *F*", as uttered by a competent speaker

3 For the sake of simplicity, I assume that the sentence does not involve any singular term either as a constituent part of the sentence's noun phrase or as a constituent part of its verb phrase.

4 The pair of terms "general" and "singular" is sometimes replaced by a closely connected pair of terms "object-independent" and "object-dependent" truth-conditions; cf., for example, Neale 1990.

5 I assume that proper names, personal pronouns and demonstratives are not quantifier expressions.

6 Various versions of the argument from identification abound. Many of them – or maybe all of them – are rooted in Strawson's famous attack on Russell's theory of descriptions; cf. Strawson 1950. Recent versions of the argument were proposed in, for example, Devitt 2004 and Kořátko 2006.

of the language in the sentence of the form “The *F* is *G*”, is used to identify a particular individual.

- 2) If an expression is used to identify a particular individual, it is a referential expression (rather than a quantifier one).
- 3) If an expression is referential, it contributes the object referred to, i.e. its referent, to the truth-conditions of the sentences in which it appears.
- 4) Thus, the definite description “the *F*” is a referential expression and contributes the object referred to, i.e. its referent, to the truth-conditions of the sentences in which it appears.

The argument from identification points out that the individual identified by the speaker’s utterance of the definite description should enter the truth-conditions of the sentence uttered. So, instead of the general truth-conditions specified above we should have the singular truth-conditions. The argument is used to support the idea that definite descriptions are referential expressions rather than quantifier ones. However, despite its superficial appeal, it is far from being conclusive. It implies that explaining the identificatory role of definite descriptions is tantamount to claiming that they are referential expressions. This is what is stated by Premise 2). However, it is this premise that is in need of justification in the first place; otherwise the argument cannot be sound.

To say that the argument is not sound is not to say that it is not valid. In fact the argument is valid in the sense that if all its premises, i.e. claims 1–3), are true, its conclusion, i.e. claim 4), has to be true as well. What I am saying is that the conclusion need not be true because not all of the premises are true. In particular, Premise 1) can be taken as true because it just registers what can be recognized as a rather widespread empirical datum; Premise 3) can also be taken as true because it just states what it means for an expression to be referential. Thus, we are left with Premise 2) as a possible troublemaker.

Identification and reference

The argument from identification assumes that an expression can be used to identify an object provided it refers to the object. However, this assumption can – and should – be doubted. First of all, however, we should clarify in which sense the terms “reference” and “identification” are used here.

The notion of *identification* is connected with a certain kind of *linguistic* and *communication behaviour*. In particular, identification is a relation between the

speaker of the language, an expression of the language and an extra-linguistic object; it holds that the speaker identifies the object by uttering the expression in question. Thus, it is the speaker of the language who can be said to identify extra-linguistic entities. When the speaker identifies something, she picks up an object and makes it a topic of the discourse. In a broader sense of identification, the speaker may use various kinds of means – she may stretch out her hand and point to an object; she may put her hand on an object; she may use various linguistic devices (with or without a simultaneous gesture); etc. For our present purposes, however, the more limited notion of identification (specified in the second sentence of this paragraph) suffices.

The notion of *reference* is connected with certain kinds of *relation between expressions and extra-linguistic entities*. Thus, it is expressions themselves which can be said to refer to something.⁷ Reference can be taken as a kind of a semantically-based relation. For example, a proper name refers to an individual provided there is a semantic convention according to which the proper name names the individual and the individual is a bearer of the name. What is important for us is that if an expression is referential, it contributes the object referred to into the truth-conditions of the sentences in which the expression occurs.

Let us return to our assumption according to which an expression can be used to identify an object provided the expression refers to the object. There are at least two ways in which we can read such an assumption – prescriptively and descriptively. When read in a *prescriptive* way, it claims that whenever one finds an expression which can be used to identify an object, one may postulate the reference relation between the expression and the object. Such a reading suggests a special convention associating the notions of identification and reference in a certain way. Anyway, as with all suggestions of these kinds, we are free to deny it. When read in a *descriptive* way, it claims that the speaker is allowed to identify objects only by using the expressions

7 This notion of reference is rather alien to Strawson and his followers. According to them, expressions themselves cannot be said to refer to anything; instead, it is users of the language who can be taken as referring to something; cf. Strawson 1950, Linsky 1963 or Searle 1969. However, it is by no means difficult to define a notion of reference as a relation between expressions and extra-linguistic entities. After all, Linsky himself did it. Many interesting considerations on various kinds of reference and their connections to identification can be found in Cmorej 2001 and 2009.

which refer to these objects. This is a more promising way because, in descriptive reading, the claim becomes an empirical one about a certain kind of linguistic behaviour and a certain kind of semantic properties of expressions. Empirical claims can be tested and either verified or falsified. Consequently, disputes over empirical claims can be settled by arguments and evidence. Thus, the claim that identification assumes reference should be read descriptively. The claim can be doubted provided it can be shown that there are examples of expressions which are not referential, but can be used to identify objects.

Data about identification

The claim that it is only referential expressions which can be used to identify objects is empirically implausible. If it is implausible, we cannot infer that an expression is referential provided it can be used to identify something. The main reason is that there are many kinds of expressions which both can be used to identify something and are by no means treated as referential expressions.

As we have said, the aim of identification is to select an object as a topic of discourse. Obviously, this can be done by any suitable kind of expression without claiming that the expression in question refers to the object identified. Let me present two illustrative kinds of cases in which we might be willing to say that an expression is used to identify an object without there being any reference relation between the expression and the object identified.

Firstly, the speaker may successfully identify a particular individual by using a definite description despite the fact that the individual identified fails to exemplify the property expressed by the definite description in question. Consider a situation, in which the speaker uttered the sentence, “The Russian tsar is unscrupulous”. She intended to say something about Vladimir Putin by her utterance of the sentence. For the reasons we need not go into – be it her true ignorance of the relevant political facts or her scornful attitude to Putin’s political practice or anything else – she used the definite description “the Russian tsar” to identify Putin. She was successful despite the fact that Putin does not exemplify the property of *being the Russian tsar*; strictly speaking, no actual individual, including Putin himself, does exemplify it. Anyway, her hearers have deciphered the speaker’s message and have recognized that she has called Putin unscrupulous.

An analogous situation might arise had the speaker used a definite description which, in fact, expresses a property which is exemplified by someone, though not by the individual identified. Suppose the speaker uttered the sentence, “The Russian prime minister is unscrupulous”. Again, she identified Putin by using the description “the Russian prime minister” and her hearers have recognized it. This held despite the fact that it was Dmitri Medvedev rather than Vladimir Putin who was the Russian prime minister (and, thus, exemplified the property of *being the Russian prime minister*). It would be extremely implausible to say that the description “the Russian prime minister” referred to Putin because the speaker used to identify Putin by her use. If the definite description is to be allowed to refer to anything at all, it should refer to Medvedev. To sum up, we may admit that the speaker identified Putin by her uses of “the Russian tsar” or “the Russian prime minister”; however, this cannot oblige us to admit that the descriptions did refer to Putin.

Secondly, the speaker may successfully identify a particular individual by using an expression which is not a singular term at all. The speaker may use various kinds of quantifier phrases, for example, to select the intended individual and the hearer may recognize what the speaker is doing by her utterance. By way of illustration, consider a situation, in which the speaker uttered the sentence, “Someone in this room owns a Ferrari”. The quantifier phrase “someone in this room” was used by the speaker to identify a particular person even though the phrase merely quantified over the set of persons present in this room. Despite this linguistic fact, the speaker was successful in her identification and the hearer has correctly recognized who was identified. Anyway, we would not claim that the phrase “someone in this room” referred to the person identified by the speaker’s utterance. Again, we can see that there is a gap between identification and reference that need not – and even should not – be bridged forcibly by any statements about their interconnections.⁸

The above cases are merely sketched, but the message seems to me clear enough: Given their communication intentions, surroundings, background, etc., the speakers are free to use various kinds of expressions to identify objects. This holds even in the case of expressions which are not taken as (semantically) referring to the objects identified. Thus, we should not derive

8 Both kinds of examples are discussed at great length by Stephen Neale in Neale 1990: Ch. 3.

any semantically relevant pieces of information concerning an expression's reference from the mere fact that the expression can be used – or has been used – to identify something.

If the above reasoning is sound, we should extend it to definite descriptions as well. Consider the case in which the speaker used a definite description to identify the object which (uniquely) exemplified the property expressed by the description. We might be tempted to claim that the definite description referred to the object in question. However, we should resist this temptation unless there are strong reasons in its favour. If the claim that the definite description is a referential term is based merely on this kind of identification uses, it would not be justified enough. The reason is that there are clear cases in which we would not treat identification uses of expressions as reasons for classifying these expressions as referential ones. In other words, if definite descriptions are to be taken as referential expressions, we need arguments that are not based on our identification practice.

Variable universes

The argument from the previous section notwithstanding, it might be claimed that there are good reasons for establishing semantically relevant connections between identification and reference in the case of definite descriptions. Unless we admit that definite descriptions are expressions semantically referring to individuals the speakers used to identify we could not get the truth-conditions of certain kinds of sentences right. This can be said about the sentences involving descriptions which express properties exemplified by more than one individual. According to Russell's theory, such a sentence is false; however, the speaker should be often taken as saying something true by it. Suppose the speaker utters the sentence, "The apple is rotten". We are tempted to say that the sentence is true provided 1) there is a contextually salient apple the speaker had in mind and 2) the apple in question is rotten. This is true despite the fact that the set of apples is not a singleton set. Russell's theory is too demanding here: It requires that there be exactly one apple in the whole universe of discourse and this apple should be rotten in order for the sentence to be true. Obviously, this is not how it works in the natural language.

It might be suggested that a more appropriate explanation which meets our daily communication practice consists in that the definite description

is taken as an expression referring to the salient apple; the sentence, “The apple is rotten”, is true provided this apple is rotten. This suggestion is tantamount to saying that the definite description is a referential expression rather than a quantifier one. Although we might admit that this suggestion solves the problem in question, it is by no means general enough. The reason is that the phenomenon is widespread and concerns a large set of quantifier expressions.

A short detour to other kinds of quantifier expressions might help us find a more general solution. The core problem with Russell’s theory consists in the assumption that there is a fixed and stable universal set of all individuals and the quantified sentences in language are about this universal set. Let us consider a simple example. Suppose that a competent speaker of the language utters, in a certain situation, the sentence, “All apples are rotten”. Since she is a competent speaker, she assumes that her utterance is both correct and suitable for reaching her communication ends. Let us suppose that, in uttering “All apples are rotten”, she intends to describe the situation in her house.

Now, according to ordinary semantic theory, the sentence uttered would be true provided the set of all rotten individuals involved the set of all apples as its subset. Had there been at least one apple such that it was not a member of the set of rotten individuals, the sentence uttered would be false. Assuming the universal set is identified with the set of all individuals in our world (whatever they are), there seems to be a discrepancy between our real practice and our explanation. The explanation requires that the sentence be false because there are a lot of apples in the universal set that are not rotten. Despite this fact, we are strongly inclined to say that the speaker said something true provided all apples in her house are rotten while the condition of other apples outside her house is irrelevant for the truth value of the sentence. What our communication practice suggests is that we do not in fact assume there is a fixed and stable set of all individuals that is described by all sentences uttered. Rather, we freely go through various universes that are relevant for particular stretches of discourse. When the speaker describes her apples, she is talking about those stored in her house, but remains silent about those that are located in innumerable other places in the world; in such a case we may identify the universal set with the set of individuals occupying a particular place in the speaker’s house. When she changes the

subject-matter and starts talking about something else, it is highly probable that the set of individuals she is talking about differs from the one spoken about previously.

To sum up, our communication practice does not assume that there is a fixed universal set of all individuals and that our utterances are about this set of individuals. Rather, we work with variable universes in particular communication situations.⁹ This is a simple explanation of our language use. The speaker of “All apples are rotten” knows that there are more apples in the world and not just those in her house. Furthermore, she fully masters what the sentence means; in particular, she knows that the sentence is about all apples – full stop. Despite this fact she utters it and believes that her utterance is true. This set of claims about our language use and communication practice would be incompatible without further provisions. As far as I know, the simplest way to get rid of the air of incompatibility is to admit that we work with variable universes.

The strategy based on the idea of variable universes is general. It can be applied in the case of definite descriptions as well. Let us go back to our example, “The apple is rotten”. We may admit that we do use the sentences of this kind despite the fact that we also know that there are more individuals of the relevant kind in the world; in particular, the speaker might use the sentence even in the case she is aware of the fact that there are more apples in the world. And she can do so without any suspicion that her utterance would be false for that reason. A simple explanation along the above lines has it that the universal set involves just one apple; in particular, the universal set invoked by the speaker need not be the same as the set of all individuals there are in the world; rather, she might have in mind a fairly limited subset of this set.

To sum up, when we introduce the idea of variable universes into our semantic theory, we may satisfactorily explain the truth-conditions of all kinds of sentences involving quantifier expressions; on the other hand, the suggestion according to which definite descriptions are referential expressions

9 The idea of variable universes was suggested by various philosophers; one of the most elaborated suggestions is that of *situation semantics* developed by Jon Barwise and John Perry; cf. Barwise – Perry 1983.

is not general enough because it does not enable us to satisfactorily handle sentences involving other kinds of quantifier phrases.

Conclusion

No doubt, definite descriptions are often used to identify individuals; this is a feature they have in common with proper names, demonstratives or personal pronouns. And since proper names, demonstratives and personal pronouns are usually supposed to be paradigmatic instances of referential expressions, the same should hold for definite descriptions as well.¹⁰ If it does hold that definite descriptions are referential expressions, the truth-conditions of sentences involving them are singular.

As we have seen, it might be unreliable to conclude that a certain kind of expression is referential from the fact that it can be used to identify individuals. There are cases in which we would be reluctant to claim that an expression, which was used to identify an individual, has to be taken as referring to the individual in question. This may hold even in the case of definite descriptions which were used to identify individuals; in particular, we would not admit that a description refers to an individual which does not (uniquely) exemplify the property expressed by the description. Thus there need be no link between identification and reference because there need be no significant link between our communication practice and the semantic behaviour of expressions.

Identification devices occurring in our language need not be identified with referential expressions. Consequently, we may both retain the idea that the speakers of a given language often use definite descriptions to identify extra-linguistic objects and adopt a theory according to which definite descriptions are true quantifier expressions. The truth-conditions of the sentences involving definite description are general in such a case (provided the sentences involve no referential expressions). And if we adopt the view that

¹⁰ Nowadays, there are certain attempts to class demonstratives with quantifier expressions rather than with referential expressions. While Ernest Lepore and Kirk Ludwig claim that it is merely simple demonstratives that should be taken as referential expressions and that complex ones have to be treated as quantifier expressions, Jeffrey King proposed to take both kinds of demonstratives – simple and complex – as quantifiers of a sort; cf. Lepore – Ludwig 2000 and King 2001. In King 2001 one may find an elaborated collection of arguments for the quantificational treatment of demonstratives.

definite descriptions are quantifier expressions we may, as well, retain various similarities between descriptions and other kinds of expressions which are usually treated as quantifier phrases.

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