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## **Descriptions**

Berit Brogaard

Australian National University

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Descriptions are phrases of the form ‘an F’, ‘the F’, ‘Fs’, ‘the Fs’, ‘[noun-phrase]’s F’ and ‘[noun-phrase]’s Fs’ (e.g. ‘a woman’, ‘the tallest spy’, ‘apples’, ‘the students’, ‘my cat’, ‘Peter’s cars’). They can be indefinite (e.g., ‘an F’, ‘Fs’, ‘[noun-phrase]’s F’, ‘NP’s Fs’), definite (e.g. ‘the F’, ‘the Fs’), singular (e.g., ‘an F’, ‘the F’, ‘[noun-phrase]’s F’) or plural (e.g., ‘the Fs’, ‘Fs’, ‘[noun-phrase]’s Fs’). In English plural indefinite descriptions lack an article and are for that reason also known as ‘bare plurals’.

The semantics of descriptions has been one of the central topics in philosophy for more than a century. Issues at the center of the debate include the following:

- (i) What do description sentences semantically assert? If Taffy is department chair, does ‘the department chair is tall’ assert that Taffy is tall? Or does it assert that whoever happens to be the chair is tall? Or does it assert something else altogether?
  
- (ii) How do we best to account for definite descriptions that seem to pick out a unique object in a scenario in which no unique object satisfies the descriptive component? For example, if there are ten tables in the room and I say ‘The book is on the table’, might I have succeeded in saying something true?

(iii) Do descriptions have referential uses? An expression is used referentially just in case it picks out an object, and the descriptive material (if any) does not fully determine which object is picked out. For example, 'The man drinking a martini' functions referentially if it picks out someone who is actually drinking water.

(iv) Are descriptions best treated as quantifiers or predicates? A quantifier expresses quantity (e.g., 'every student', 'three men', 'most dogs', etc). A predicate is an expression that is true of exactly those things that possess the property the predicate expresses, for example, 'student' is true of exactly those things that have the property of being a student. 'The Danish spy' functions as a quantifier if it quantifies over Danish spies. 'The Danish spy is tall' asserts that the set of Danish spies is a singleton set which is a subset of the set of tall people. 'The Danish spy' functions as a predicate if it is true of exactly those things that possess the property of being the (only) Danish spy. If descriptions function as predicates, they cannot occur in argument position but can only occur in predicate position, as in 'Søren is the Danish spy'. Predicative descriptions can occur in the predicate restrictor position of a quantifier, as in 'An owner of a Porsche is *usually* smug'. 'Usually' here functions as a quantifier. So, the underlying form is: [Most  $x$ : being an owner of a Porsche  $x$ ](being smug  $x$ ).

(v) How do we account for plural and generic descriptions? Can 'the students asked questions' be true if only four out of twenty students asked questions? What do 'The dinosaur is extinct' and 'The Chrysler is sold on the West Coast' assert?

This entry focuses on the contemporary philosophical debate over these issues.

## **Bertrand Russell's Theory of Descriptions**

Most of the philosophical literature on descriptions has dealt with singular descriptions and has followed Bertrand Russell in treating these phrases on a par with quantified noun phrases such as 'some F' and 'every F'. In the early 1900 descriptions were commonly treated as special kinds of proper names. In his well-known book *Principles of Mathematics* (not to be confused with *Principia Mathematica*, which Russell later co-authored with Alfred Whitehead), Russell suggested that unlike genuinely proper names, which denote their referents directly, descriptions are to be treated as so-called denoting phrases. Denoting phrases denote their denotation via a denoting concept.

In his seminal work "On Denoting", published in *Mind* 1905, Russell offered a new theory of descriptions. According to the new theory, no phrases denote their denotation indirectly via a denoting concept. Description sentences are equivalent to sentence that do not contain a denoting phrase: 'The teacher of Plato is wise', for example, is equivalent to: 'there is a unique teacher of Plato, and he is wise'. So, even though the description sentence 'the teacher of Plato is wise' is grammatically a subject-predicate sentence, it is not logically a subject-predicate sentence, as it is equivalent to a quantified sentence in which 'the teacher of Plato' does not occur. For Russell, descriptions are thus incomplete symbols which have no meaning in themselves. They can be defined only via a contextual definition and not directly.

Though Russell's new theory has become something of a paradigm of analytic philosophy, it has been challenged on a number of occasions. In "On Referring" Peter Strawson offered reasons for treating definite descriptions as referential. His main charge against Russell was that Russell incorporates aspects of what a description sentence presupposes into what it says. Intuitively, when the presupposition fails, we have a misfire, not, as Russell would have it, a falsehood. For example, 'the king of France is bald' mistakenly presupposes that France is a monarchy, and so an utterance of this sentence has no truth-value. As further evidence against Russell, Strawson points out that some definite descriptions denote despite failing to be uniquely satisfied. 'The

book is on the table' is perfectly felicitous in many contexts, but it is not true in the actual world that there is exactly one book on exactly one table.

### **Strawson's Critique**

Many attempts have been made to save Russell's theory from Strawson's objections. A response to Strawson's charge that Russell confuses what is presupposed by an uttered sentence with what is said can be found in, for example, Stephen Neale's book-length treatment of the topic. In recent years the problem of incomplete descriptions has been dealt with, for instance, by appealing to quantifier domain restriction, as this strategy has been developed by Jason Stanley and Zoltán Szabó. On their account, 'every bottle is on the table' can be true even though not every bottle is on the table, because 'bottle' is thought to be associated with an implicit variable whose value is determined by context. The noun phrase together with the completed variable may denote only, say, the bottles in the kitchen. Stanley has argued that the problem of incomplete descriptions can be resolved in the same way.

### **Donnellan's Ambiguity Thesis**

Another legendary charge against Russell originated in Keith Donnellan's "Reference and Definite Descriptions". Donnellan observed that a description may be used (1) attributively to pick out the object (if any) that uniquely satisfies the description or (2) referentially to refer to the object the speaker has in mind, and it may be so used even if the object does not satisfy the description. This is the so-called ambiguity thesis. In one of Donnellan's examples Jones is on trial, charged with Smith's murder. According to Donnellan, if we use 'Smith's murderer is insane' intending to pick out Jones, we might well say something true of Jones, even if it should turn out that Smith committed suicide. But if he did, then Russell's theory predicts that we said something false.

Saul Kripke, Neale, and Peter Ludlow, among others, have since then offered extensive criticism of Donnellan's theory (and close variants). According to Kripke, the occurrence of referential uses of definite descriptions among English speakers does not disprove that the Russellian analysis is correct for English. Kripke's argument relies on the notion of pragmatic implication. For example, if I say 'the dishes are dirty', I semantically assert that the dishes are dirty but I may *pragmatically implicate* that I want you to do them. What is pragmatically implicated by a sentence is not determined by the sentence's grammar and the conventional meaning of the lexical items. Kripke thought that, by appealing to pragmatics, Russellians can explain the phenomena associated with referential uses without positing a semantic ambiguity. Donnellan's ambiguity thesis and the pragmatically enriched Russellian account thus accommodate the same phenomena overall, even if they accommodate different phenomena at the semantic level. In addition, the pragmatically enriched Russellian account appeals to pragmatic principles we at any rate have to posit in order to accommodate our intuitions about various other expressions. Kripke concludes, based on this and other reasons, that the pragmatically enriched Russellian account is preferable to Donnellan's ambiguity thesis.

Neale and Stanley, among others, have later suggested that Donnellan and his critics might both be right. Suppose, for example, that I say (intending to communicate a proposition about a person in my visual field) 'The guy is drunk'. It is plausible to think that what I have said is equivalent to 'There is a unique guy  $x$ , and  $x = a$ , and  $x$  is drunk', where ' $a$ ' is a name of the relevant person. So, the statement is used both attributively, to pick out the drunk guy, and referentially, to pick out  $a$ .

### **Descriptions as Predicates**

In recent years further challenges have been directed against Russell's original theory. Delia Graff Fara has argued that descriptions should be treated as predicates rather than quantifiers. 'Is

a man' and 'is the owner of a Porsche', as they occur in 'Kim is a man' and 'Kim is the owner of a Porsche', are to be interpreted in much the same way as the predicate 'is human'. Fara offers two reasons against treating descriptions occurring predicatively as quantifiers. One is that, unlike descriptions, quantifiers do not occur in predicate position (compare '\*Sam and Lisa are not few students').

The other is that descriptions do not seem to give rise to the sorts of scope ambiguities they would give rise to if they were quantifiers. Quantifiers may take wide or narrow scope with respect to other operators, as in:

- (1) John didn't talk to some philosopher

On the narrow-scope reading, (1) says that it is not the case that John talked to a philosopher, hence that John didn't talk to any philosopher; on the wide-scope reading, it says that there is a philosopher which John didn't talk to. But now consider:

- (2) John is not a philosopher.

Russell's theory predicts that (2) has a reading according to which there is a philosopher that is not identical to John. But this is not a possible interpretation of (2), which can only mean that John is not identical to any philosopher. Descriptions in predicative position thus seem to be narrow-scope takers. Prima facie, this is odd if they are quantifiers.

Fara has also offered an argument against Russell's analysis of descriptions in apparent argument position. Consider:

- (3) An owner of a Porsche is usually smug.

(3) can be read as saying that some owner of a Porsche is smug most of the time, that Porsche owners, in general, are smug most of the time, or that most Porsche owners are smug. On Russell's theory, only the first reading is available. On the predicate proposal, the description occurs predicatively, preceded by the adverbial quantifiers 'sometimes', 'generally' or 'usually'. So, all three readings are available.

### **A Unified Theory**

Szabó, Gabriel Segal and Ludlow have offered a different challenge to Russell's theory.

Consider (from Szabó):

- (4) A man entered the room with five others. The man took off his hat and gave it to one of the others.

We can imagine (4) being true. But under Russell's treatment, it's contradictory. It is contradictory because under Russell's treatment, 'the man took off his hat' entails that there is exactly one man. Yet the previous sentence entails that there is not exactly one man. Of course, it may be argued that context furnish an adequate delimitation of the domain of discourse or an adequate completion of the description. However, Szabó thinks this approach is doubtful in cases where the speaker has no particular individual in mind. If Sherlock Holmes deduces (4) from general clues, he may not know enough to pick out any one of the relevant men. Nonetheless, in uttering (4) he could be saying something true. This is taken as evidence that sentences containing definite descriptions, like the analogous sentences containing indefinite descriptions, can be true even if the description is not uniquely satisfied.

### **Plural Definite Descriptions**

Plural definite descriptions present independent problems. On one Russellian account of plurals, 'the Fs are G' implies that every one of the Fs satisfies a singular form of the plural predicate G. Russellians thus mistakenly predict that the following sentences have the same truth-conditions:

- (5) Every one of the students asked questions
- (6) The students asked questions

Berit Brogaard has argued that plural definite descriptions are best treated as having the semantic import of partitives of the form 'some of the Fs', 'all of the Fs', 'none of the Fs', etc. Partitives tell us how many of the Fs individually or collectively satisfy the predicate. 'Every one of the students' tells us that every one of the students satisfies the predicate 'is an  $x$  such that  $x$  asked a question'. In the case of non-partitive plural definite descriptions, the force of the quantifier is determined by the speaker's knowledge of the lexical nature of the predicate. In the envisaged context for (6) the students satisfy the plural predicate 'asked questions' just in case some of them satisfy the singular predicate 'is an  $x$  such that  $x$  asked a question'.

### **Generic Uses**

A further criticism of Russell's theory is that it cannot be extrapolated to account for generic uses of descriptions, as in:

- (7) The dinosaur is extinct.

Richard Sharvy, Fara, and Brogaard have argued that common nouns like 'dinosaur' or 'bear' serve sometimes as predicates true of individual animals and sometimes as predicates true of larger taxa, as in 'there are two bears in Alaska: the black bear and the grizzly' or 'the crustaceans evolved simultaneously'. However, this account does not generalize. Consider:

(8) The Chrysler is sold on the West Coast.

(8) doesn't say that the Chrysler species, as a whole, is sold on the West Coast. It says either that Chryslers, in general, are sold on the West Coast or that some Chryslers are sold on the West Coast. The evidence thus points toward a non-uniform interpretation of generic uses of descriptions.

#### Further Readings

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See also: Descriptive Thought; Generics; Indexicals and Demonstratives; Pragmatics and Semantics; Sense and Reference.