DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS WITHOUT UNIQUENESS: A REPLY TO ABBOTT

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1. The view

The first cautiously critical remark about the uniqueness clause in Russell's theory of definite descriptions comes just a few lines before the theory itself. In 'On Denoting' Russell writes:[1]

Now, *the*, when it is strictly used, involves uniqueness; we do, it is true, speak of '*the son* of So-and-so' even when So-and-so has several sons, but it would be more correct to say '*a* son of So-and-so'. Thus for our purposes we take *the* as involving uniqueness.

While it may be that for Russell's purposes it is safe to idealize away from certain facts about how 'the' is used in English, the same is not true when our aim is to provide an empirically adequate semantics for this word.[2] Still, if Russell were correct in his observation that whenever there are multiple *F*s it is more correct to use the indefinite article in talking about one of them, we might reasonably accuse speakers who nonetheless choose to use the definite article of sloppy talk. But Russell overstates his case: there is no universal preference for 'an *F*' over 'the *F*' when there are multiple *F*'s. In particular, if the speaker wishes to say something about a particular *F* already under discussion, it is quite *incorrect* to use 'an *F*'. Doing so would likely be misconstrued as an attempt to change the subject and say something about a *different F*.

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[1] Russell (1905): 213.
[2] Russell says that the subject is important not only in logic and mathematics, but also in epistemology. The logical and mathematical significance of the theory of descriptions is obvious to any reader of the *Principia Mathematica*. The theory also explains how we can think and talk about entities we are not acquainted with, which is its chief epistemological virtue; cf. Russell (1905): 212. Russell (1957) is quite explicit that he does not intend provide an empirically adequate description of our everyday language, but rather to propose a linguistic reform for the language we employ for technical purposes. As Quine puts it, Russell's theory is primarily "a means of getting on in science without use of any real equivalent of the vernacular 'the'" ; cf. Quine (1953): 151.

In contemporary discussions, it is widely acknowledged that there are cases when definite descriptions carry no apparent uniqueness implication. The most striking examples involve definite descriptions that are anaphorically linked to indefinites, as in (1):

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

It would be hard to deny that this sequence of sentences could be true, even though the original Russellian theory interprets it as a contradiction. Contemporary Russellians tend to dodge this problem by appealing to domain restriction. Although there is no unique man who entered the room provided the first sentence is true, there may still be a unique man among the things 'the man' in the second sentence quantifies over. The question is what this more restricted domain is supposed to be.[3]

It is often said that the unique man is the one the speaker "had in mind" or the one he "mentioned" by uttering the first sentence of (1). But these are bogus explanations. The relevant intuition is that (1) could be true in a context, even if the speaker had *no information* that distinguishes one of the six men entering the room from the rest, that is, even if he was not in a position to have in mind or mention any one of them in particular. For example, suppose Sherlock Holmes deduces from general clues at the scene of a crime that six men entered the room, one of whom took off his hat and handed it over to another. He does not know whether another of the six also took off his hat and gave it to someone who entered the room with him; all he knows is that *at least one* of them did that. In this case, Holmes does not know enough to single out in thought or speech any one of the relevant men. Nonetheless, it seems clear that he could say something true in uttering (1).

If speaker intention cannot narrow down the domain of 'the man' into a singleton set what can? (The linguistic meanings of the words used and the external setting of the utterance clearly won't do the job.) I've met more than one defender of the Russellian

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[3] There are some who deny that the second sentence in (1) expresses a complete proposition. Even if that were correct, the speaker uttering (1) can still assert a complete proposition – what *he* says is true or false, even if the *sentence* he employs is neither. So, the problem of determining the relevant domain remains for such a theorist, even if it arises at a different level.

theory who responded to this rhetorical question by a shrug of the shoulders and a casual remark about our general ignorance of how context enters into interpretation. But I don't think this will do. For it seems to me that (2) is no more contradictory than (1):

(2)   There is an elementary particle in a large container. The particle is absolutely indiscernible from another particle in the same container.

No matter what the mechanism of domain restriction might be, (2) *must be* a contradiction for the Russellian. If it were not, the domain associated with 'the particle' would contain just one of two indiscernible elementary particles, and consequently the predicate 'is in the domain associated with 'the particle'' would apply to one but not the other. But there cannot be such a predicate if the particles are really indiscernible.[4]

Examples like (1) and (2) convince me (and perhaps some others) that a unitary Russellian semantics for definite descriptions is incorrect. (I find it particularly hard to believe that (1) can be true while (2) is an inescapable contradiction. I detect no significant difference in acceptability between these sentences.)[5] In addition to these considerations, I presented two further arguments in my 'Descriptions and Uniqueness.'[6] One is a parity argument directed at those who (like me) accept Kripke's defense of the Russellian theory against Donnellan.[7] I claimed that the same sort of methodological considerations that are used to argue against the semantic significance of referential uses of definite descriptions tell against the semantic significance of their uniqueness-involving uses. The other is a speculative argument directed at those who (like me) think that there are robust semantic universals across natural languages involving

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[4] Note that the argument is independent of the question whether it is metaphysically possible for there to be indiscernible elementary particles. Even if what the second sentence of (2) expresses is impossible, the sentence is still not a contradiction.
[5] The intuitions I am relying on here are, alas, controversial. Evans (1980) explicitly says that there is a uniqueness contrast between 'There is a doctor in London and he is Welsh' and 'There is a doctor in London who is Welsh.' Given his E-type approach to unbound anaphora, it is safe to assume that he would think the contrast remains if we substitute 'the doctor' for 'he' in the former sentence. (I find the critique of Evans's claims in Heim (1982): 25-33 convincing.) Kadmon (1990) even discusses sentences similar to (2). She says that 'Leif has a chair. It's not so comfortable, though' is infelicitous when Leif has four indistinguishable chairs. (I am not sure whether this is right. But even if it is, I don't think the source of infelicity is a uniqueness clause associated with the pronoun.)
[6] Cf. Szabó (2000), section 3. For additional arguments see Ludlow and Segal (2003).
[7] Kripke (1977).

quantification.[8] It is based on the observation that if Russellians are correct about the semantics of definite descriptions, 'the' is a rather exceptional quantifier. It is a lexically simple determiner that expresses two separate cardinality conditions (i.e. 'The *F* is *G*' is true iff the number of *F*s that are *G*s is one *and* the number of *F*s that are not *G* is zero.) I conjectured that this combination of syntactic simplicity and semantic complexity *cannot* occur in any natural language.

There is another consideration I presented that is supposed to motivate departure from the Russellian orthodoxy. Just as typical uses of 'the *F*' imply that there is a unique *F*, typical uses of 'an *F*' imply that there are multiple *F*'s.[9] Although both (3) and (4) are anomalous, Russellians must give radically different accounts for what is wrong with them:

(3)   Russell is the author of the *Principia Mathematica.*
(4)   Russell is an author of the *Principles of Mathematics.*

Given the Russellian account of descriptions the violation of uniqueness in (3) yields a false sentence, while the violation of non-uniqueness in (4) does not affect the truth of that sentence. My inclination is to think that the explanations of infelicities should be parallel. This is not much more then a hunch and by itself it is unlikely to convince anyone. That is why I did not call it an *argument* against the Russellian view.

My positive view has three components. First, I claim that the semantic import of definite descriptions (just like the semantic import of indefinite descriptions) is simply existential quantification. Uniqueness implications associated with many uses of definite descriptions must be explained pragmatically. Second, I argue that the fundamental difference between indefinite and definite articles is that the former tend to introduce new elements into the discourse, while the latter tend to pick out ones that are already familiar. To make this traditional idea more precise, I adopt a theory originally advocated by Irene Heim, according to which the addressee interprets the words of the speaker in part by constructing and continuously updating a file that systematizes the information conveyed. Unlike Heim, I do not suggest that the theory of filing is an alternative

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[8] See for example Barwise and Cooper (1981), Keenan and Westerståhl (1997).

semantic theory. Files are not logical forms, since in constructing them we take pragmatic principles and a variety of heuristics into account. Finally, I argue that uniqueness implications of definite descriptions (as well as non-uniqueness implications of indefinites) arise as a result of reasoning about what the mental file of our conversational partner might contain. In relying on two constraints on filing and two meta-principles about what one may assume without specific evidence, the hearer can (in certain cases) derive that the speaker believes that there is at most one F from the fact that he used the definite description 'the F' (or that he believes that there are at least two F's from the fact that he used the indefinite description 'an F'.)

2. Are *Novelty* and *Familiarity* semantic?

In her reply, Barbara Abbott claims that I misdescribe my own view. Since "semantics is the repository of that which is conventional, typically arbitrary, and requiring stipulation, while pragmatics is the realm of the conversationally motivated"[10] there must be some semantic difference between indefinite and definite descriptions. What distinguishes them on my view is that indefinites are associated with the *Novelty* rule ("For every indefinite description, start a new file card.") and definites with the *Familiarity* rule ("For every definite description, if there is an appropriate old card in the file, update it; otherwise start a new card."). But "there is nothing inherently natural or rational about either opening a new file card or adding information to an existing card",[11] so association with these rules marks a genuine semantic difference between 'a(n)' and 'the'.

I think this is purely a verbal issue. Following fairly common (although perhaps objectionable) practice, I used the expressions 'semantic' and 'truth-conditional' pretty much interchangeably.[12] As many, perhaps most English language dictionaries attest, some condition resembling *Novelty* belongs to the lexical meaning of the indefinite article and some condition resembling *Familiarity* belongs to the lexical meaning of the definite

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[9] I use the word 'imply' in its ordinary sense, in which it stands for a broader relation than entailment. Implication can be either semantic or pragmatic.
[10] Abbott (2003): 4.
[11] Abbott *op.cit*: 5.

article. But this does not mean that the articles contribute differently to the truth-conditions of larger expressions in which they occur in extensional contexts. This is all I want to deny.

The meaning of a linguistic expression goes frequently beyond its truth-conditional import. The standard example is the contrast between 'and' and 'but' – plausibly a non-truth conditional contrast of which competent speakers must be aware in virtue of their understanding of these words. But there is another example, closer to the issue under discussion: I submit that 'at least one' and 'a(n)' have different meanings, though they are truth-conditional twins. Unlike 'a(n)', 'at least one' cannot occur as the subject of a generic sentence ('At least one elephant never forgets' vs. 'An elephant never forgets') and can be part of a complex quantifier ('at least one but no more than five' vs. *'an but no more than five'). It is hard to believe that these syntactic contrasts have nothing to do with meaning. Furthermore, the implication of non-uniqueness is markedly stronger with 'at least one', as the following minimal pair illustrates:

(5)   A woman in the lobby is waiting for the elevator.
(6)   At least one woman in the lobby is waiting for the elevator.

If there is a single woman in the lobby, the speaker of (6) made a far more misleading remark than the speaker of (5). I assume that the contrast here is due to some subtle difference in meaning, but I would *not* suggest that this fact automatically refutes the Russellian theory of indefinite descriptions. I take it that the truth-conditions of (5) and (6) are the same, and I don't think that Russellians typically want to claim more than that.

To avoid misunderstanding I will not use the term 'semantic' henceforth in discussing Abbott's objections. As far as I can tell, this won't change anything either in the points she raises or the responses I give. She believes uniqueness implications belong to the truth-conditions of sentences containing definite articles in extensional contexts and I deny this.

3. The contrast between uniqueness and non-uniqueness implications

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[12] Blind substitutions don't always work. When I say 'semantic value' I mean 'contribution to truth-conditions', when I say 'semantic representation', I mean 'representation that (at the level of sentences and

As I mentioned, a motivation for my view is to provide a uniform account for uniqueness and non-uniqueness implications. Abbott suggests that the motivation is flawed, since unlike the latter the former cannot be cancelled.

(7)   ?? Russell is the author of the *Principia Mathematica*, in fact there were two.
(8)   Russell is an author of the *Principles of Mathematics*, in the fact the only one.

There is no question that (7) sounds extremely awkward, while (8) is quite smooth. On my view these are similar attempts to cancel similar pragmatic implications, so the contrast is an important challenge for me. The Russellian, of course, has no problem with these: for him adding the second clause in (7) results in contradiction, while the second clause in (8) is a strengthening of its first clause.

I find the Russellian explanation of the contrast wanting. Although Abbott is assured that "there is a clear sense in which the utterer of [(7)] contradicts himself"[13] I find it hard to get my mind around this clear sense. (7) doesn't sound contradictory to me the way (9) does[14], and (10) doesn't sound contradictory to me *at all*.

(9)   Russell is the only author of the *Principia Mathematica*, in fact there were two.
(10)   Russell is the author of the *Principia Mathematica*, along with Whitehead.

Of course, Russellians will tell us that (7), (9) and (10) are each straightforward contradictions – I think that's exactly what is wrong with Russellian truth-conditions. But I don't want to put too much weight on these intuitions. Although Russellians have to base their explanation of the contrast between (7) and (8) on a controversial assumption, at least they *have* an explanation. Do I have an alternative explanation that is compatible with my views?

I think I do. The principal difference between (7) and (8) is that filing the former risks turning a true mental file into a false one, whereas filing the latter merely risks turning a non-redundant mental file into a redundant one. Since falsehood is worse than

above) has truth-conditions', when I say 'semantic rule' I mean 'rule for determining truth-conditions', etc.
[13] Abbott *op. cit.*: 7.

redundancy, we should expect (7) to be more awkward than (8). Let me spell out how this works in detail.

Someone who utters the first clause of (7) instructs the hearer to find an appropriate old file-card for some author of the *Principia* and update that file-card with the information that this person is Russell. Now suppose the hearer has a true mental file with two distinct file-cards for authors of the *Principia* and suppose there is some information on one of these that is true of Whitehead but not Russell. Then upon hearing the first clause of (7), the hearer must make an *arbitrary choice* in deciding which of the two file-cards to update. And if she makes the wrong choice, she will end up with a false file. What is problematic about the second clause of (7) is that by uttering it the speaker reveals that he believes something (i.e. that the *Principia* has two authors) from which he could quickly deduce that the file of the hearer could indeed be as I described. In other words, he concedes that he may have forced the hearer to make an arbitrary choice in filing his utterance, a choice that had the potential of turning a formerly true file into a false one.

Let us contrast this case with that of someone who utters the first clause of (8). This person instructs the hearer to introduce a new file card for some author of the *Principles* with the extra information that this person is Russell. Now suppose the hearer has a true and non-redundant file with a file-card that has the condition 'sole author of the *Principles*' on it. Then upon hearing the first clause of (8) the hearer must add an additional file card representing the very same person and hence, after the filing of the clause, her file will be a *redundant* one. In uttering the second clause of (8) the speaker reveals that he believes something (i.e. that the *Principles* has just one author) from which he could quickly deduce that the file of the hearer may well be as I described. That is, he concedes that he may have forced the hearer to turn her hitherto true and non-redundant file into a true but redundant one. But this is not a concession that should be anywhere near as problematic as the concession made by someone uttering (7). Creating redundancy is pardonable; forcing an arbitrary choice with the possibility of creating a

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[14] Abbott (1999) accepts that 'the *F*' and 'the only *F*' differ in meaning, but she does not think that they differ as far as the implication of uniqueness is concerned.

false file is not. This, I think, accounts reasonably well for the contrast between (7) and (8) without assuming that (7) is a contradiction.

4. Dispensing with *Novelty* and *Familiarity*?

Abbott thinks that anything that can be explained with the help of *Novelty* and *Familiarity* can also be explained without them. She gives two illustrations of this contention. First, she rejects my claim that we need *Familiarity* to account for certain facts about the use of proper names and proposes a Gricean explanation instead. Second, she sketches a derivation of the non-uniqueness implications of indefinite descriptions, thereby dispensing with an important use I made of *Novelty*. I think nether of these attempts is successful.

I appealed to *Familiarity* in explaining how we tend to use ambiguous proper names in ordinary speech. If the speaker and hearer know two Joneses, the speaker must provide some additional information to make sure that the hearer knows which Jones he has in mind when he initially utters 'Jones'. Once disambiguated, he can keep referring to the relevant Jones without providing extra information. These facts are explained if we assume that proper names are definites,[15] and as such, are associated with the *Familiarity* rule. The explanation I had in mind (but failed to spell out in full detail in my paper) is as follows. *Familiarity* instructs the hearer that upon hearing the name 'Jones', she must find an appropriate old file-card with that name on it. Since by assumption she has initially two equally appropriate file-cards, she needs some extra information in order to be able to proceed without making an arbitrary choice. Later on, the file-card more recently updated becomes a more appropriate target for additional updates, which explains why the information that can distinguish the two Joneses is no longer needed.

Abbott says that the appeal to *Familiarity* is gratuitous here. She thinks that the principle at work is "Avoid pernicious indeterminacies of meaning." This directs the speaker to clarify his first use of 'Jones' and the hearer to assume that in using the name the speaker keeps referring to the same Jones. I see how avoiding pernicious

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[15] This does not mean that they are disguised definite *descriptions*. For reasons well known since Kripke (1980), *that* assumption is not warranted.

indeterminacies will lead the speaker to add some information to his first use of 'Jones' but I am less clear how the hearer is supposed to figure out that, unless marked otherwise, 'Jones' refers subsequently to the same person. After all, there are other conventions we could use to avoid misunderstanding. We could, for example, have the rule that if the last occurrence of an ambiguous name referred to one of the Joneses, the current one must refer to the most salient other Jones (if there is one; otherwise pick an arbitrary one from the other Joneses). This rule would no doubt be less convenient than the one we actually follow, but as far as conforming to the maxim "Avoid pernicious indeterminacies of meaning" is concerned it would do just fine. The *particular way* we happen to avoid pernicious indeterminacies in this case is through *Familiarity*: the hearer knows that the speaker keeps referring to the same Jones because – due to the fact that he is the one under discussion – his file-card is the most familiar one.

Finally, let me turn to Abbott's sketch of the derivation of non-uniqueness implications of indefinite descriptions. She says "a choice of 'a' rather than 'the' conveys that 'the' is not appropriate, hence that the descriptive content of the NP does not apply uniquely (within the local discourse context)."[16] The argument here is quick, but the pattern of explanation alluded to should be familiar. Abbott presumably thinks this case is similar to scalar implicatures discussed in the literature. [17] For example, by calling someone a competent electrician one implies that she is not an excellent electrician, by saying that there are five eggs in the basket one implies that there aren't six eggs in the basket, etc. The explanation in the case of non-uniqueness goes as follows. Assume Russellian truth-conditions; then 'The F is G' entails 'An F is G' but not the other way around. Suppose we have a speaker who utters 'An F is G'. Assuming that he wants to be as informative as possible, the question arises why he did not utter the stronger sentence. (Given that 'the' is no more complex than 'a(n)', the speaker's choice of words cannot be explained by his trying to keep his utterance simple.) One possibility, of course, is that he has no evidence one way or another whether the stronger claim is true. But suppose this is for some reason unlikely. Then the best explanation for the fact that he did not utter

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[16] Abbott, *op. cit.*: 7.
[17] Abbott does not say explicitly what is supposed to fill the gap in this explanation conveniently marked by the word 'hence'. My reason for thinking that she has a scalar implicature in mind is that she mentions

'The F is G' is that he thinks this claim is false. But (again, given Russellian truth-conditions) if 'An F is G' is true and 'The F is G' is false there are at least two F's.

This is a very elegant explanation. But I fear it is too elegant. Note that the exact same pattern of reasoning would tell the hearer that since the speaker chose to utter 'An F is G' instead of 'Two F's are G', he must think the latter sentence is false. Assuming that 'Two F's are G' has the same truth-conditions as 'At least two F's are G', this yields the result that in uttering 'An F is G' the speaker implies that there is exactly one F that is G.[18] But the speaker implies no such thing. I don't see a principled way to rule out this implication while retaining the one Abbott wishes to appeal to. [19]

Abbott rightly complains that my pragmatic derivation of non-uniqueness is cumbersome. On the other hand (once you fix a mistake that regrettably slipped into print)[20] it might actually work. I am doubtful whether the same can be said of explanations based on scalar implicature.[21]

Hawkins (1991) in an associated footnote and Hawkins does give a rather elaborate scalar implicature story.

[18] If 'Two F's are G' has instead the truth-conditions of 'Exactly two F's are G', the implication is that there is exactly one F that is G or at least three Fs that are G. Then we can consider the fact that the speaker also did not utter 'Three F's are G', 'Four F's are G', … and reach the even more unintuitive result that in uttering 'An F is G' the speaker implies that either there is exactly one F that is G or there are infinitely many F's that are G.

[19] Heim (1991) notes that if we abandon the Russellian account of descriptions and assume that a sentence of the form 'The F is G' semantically presupposes the existence of a unique F, we could derive the non-uniqueness in a way similar to scalar implicatures from the maxim: "Make your contribution presuppose as much as possible." (The use of 'the F' presupposes that there is a unique F, the use of 'an F' does not. If the speaker opted for the latter then presumably she believes some presupposition of 'the F' is false. But it cannot be the existence presupposition, for that follows from what the speaker actually said. So, it must be the uniqueness presupposition.) The problem is that the maxim "Make your contribution presuppose as much as possible" is hard to justify in terms of Grice's Cooperative Principle. One might speculate about the general cognitive advantages of presupposing, but these are hard to pinpoint in the case when the speaker's choice is between the words 'a(n)' and 'the'.

[20] In footnote 8 of her paper Abbott points out an embarrassing mistake in my derivation of non-uniqueness. I stated the first step as follows: "Suppose I had a private F card with conditions that cannot be satisfied by more than one individual. Then I could not have filed A's utterance in accordance with (I): either Novelty or Non-redundancy would have been violated." (41) This is false. Of course I could have uniquely identifying information about a number of F's and still introduce a new F-card into my file without redundancy, provided that some of the satisfiers of this new card are distinct from all the satisfiers of those uniquely identifying old file-cards. The first sentence in the above quote should read as follows: "Suppose I had a private F-card with conditions that guarantee that its satisfier is the only F." I thank Barbara Abbott for catching this mistake and for providing the opportunity of correcting it in print.

[21] Thanks to Tamar Szabó Gendler, Delia Graff, Harold Hodes, and Peter Ludlow for comments and discussion.

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