

Preface

In *Mind* for 1905, Bertrand Russell published a fourteen-page paper entitled "On Denoting" in which he presented his famous *Theory of Descriptions*. The present work is, in part, an attempt to explicate, defend, and extend the central theses of that notoriously difficult and controversial paper, and to explain why these theses should be taken very seriously by contemporary philosophers, logicians, and linguists.

Unlike Russell's paper, it is not the purpose of the present work to present any fundamentally new ideas; its purpose is to fuse a variety of existing ideas in a coherent and productive way, and to present the results in a form that will be useful to both philosophers and linguists. There have been many innovative moves and technical accomplishments in the philosophy of language, philosophical logic, and theoretical linguistics since the beginning of the century; and in light of some of these developments, a strong case can be made for giving the Theory of Descriptions a prominent position in contemporary work on the semantics of natural language. Not only does Russell's theory interact in elegant and productive ways with contemporary accounts of quantification, variable-binding, anaphora, syntactical structure, and indexicality, it also forces the philosopher of language to think hard about important methodological issues concerning the so-called "division of linguistic labor."

The present essay is a thoroughly overhauled and expanded version of my doctoral thesis, written under the supervision of John Perry at Stanford University and submitted in August 1988. Two factors jointly conspired to steer me toward a thesis on descriptions. In the spring of 1985, I attended a graduate seminar on the philosophy of language taught by John Perry and Jon Barwise. I was a staunch advocate of broadly Gricean accounts of speaker's meaning and the semantics-pragmatics distinction; since Barwise and Perry saw things rather differently, there was a great deal to argue about. Much of their seminar was devoted to the interpretation of "singular terms,"

and since I had already made up my mind to write on the semantics-pragmatics distinction, I began to think that detailed work on definite descriptions would provide the basis of a valuable case study. A lengthy conversation with Paul Grice, a close reading of Saul Kripke's openly Gricean characterization of the debate surrounding so-called "referential" uses of descriptions, and a couple of off-hand remarks by Stuart Hampshire all reinforced my belief that a critical examination of the Gricean defense of Russell would make a good chapter. An entire dissertation on descriptions seemed out of the question—especially after Stuart's comment that the only surer way to unemployment in the humanities was a dissertation on Virginia Woolf.

The second route to definite descriptions was a graduate seminar on events taught by Julius Moravcsik and Ed Zalta in the autumn of 1985. It seemed to me that some important metaphysical issues were turning on delicate semantical matters concerning the interpretation of various modal operators and definite descriptions of actions and events. The problems here seemed both more pressing and more exciting than those surrounding the semantics-pragmatics distinction, and a rather different dissertation started to come into focus. It would be easy enough, I thought, to spell out and defend Russell's theory in a single chapter using the material on descriptions from the earlier project. I could then move on to descriptions of actions and events, and finally to the metaphysical issues that had bothered me in the first place. I never got past stage one. The Theory of Descriptions seemed to be under attack from all sides, and I decided that a thorough defense was in order.

Many people have influenced this work over the last few years. A chronological tour seems to me to be both the most pleasurable way to record one's debt and the easiest way to avoid oversight. My earliest and greatest debt is to John Perry, who began his supervision by overseeing the conversion of an early paper into a rough draft of Chapter 3 in the summer of 1986. Discussions with Trip McCrossin were invaluable at this stage. Autumn of 1986 was spent at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, rewriting Chapter 3 and putting together a first draft of Chapter 2. Thanks go to Martin Davies, Kathinka Evers, Jennifer Hornsby, Peter Strawson, David Wiggins, and Deirdre Wilson for valuable discussion and hospitality. I am particularly indebted to Martin, who by way of written comments, conversation, and the discussion of descriptions in his underutilized book *Meaning, Quantification, Necessity*, has left his mark on every chapter of the present work.

Versions of Chapter 3 were presented in talks at CNRS in November 1986, at University College London in December 1986, and back at Stanford in January 1987. I am especially grateful to François Recanati and Dan Sperber for valuable discussions while I was in Paris. I'm not sure how many long afternoons François and I spent discussing descriptions and the semantics-pragmatics distinction, but I *do* know that our discussions played an important role in the subsequent restructuring of Chapter 3—although François disagrees with the main conclusions drawn there.

On returning to Stanford in January of 1987, I began to worry about various problems concerning the interpretation of pronouns anaphoric on definite and indefinite descriptions, and I found myself drawn to Gareth Evans' pioneering work on pronominal anaphora. At the same time as I began jotting down notes for Chapter 5, I began work on a joint paper with Peter Ludlow on Russell's theory of *indefinite* descriptions. We gave two talks on indefinite descriptions and anaphora at Stanford later that spring and I presented a summary of our position at a summer meeting of the ASL in Granada, Spain. Ever since, there has been a two-way flow of ideas and examples between parts of our joint paper and several sections of the present work (3.5, 4.2, 5.4, 5.5, and 5.7). This is not to say that Peter agrees with everything in *this* essay.

Work on Chapters 5 and 6 continued throughout the academic year 1987-88, and some of the material was presented at a meeting of the ASL in New York in December 1987, a talk at the University of Pittsburgh in January 1988, a talk at Linacre College, Oxford in February 1988, and an APA Pacific Division meeting in Portland in March 1988. I am grateful to Nick Asher, George Bealer, Nuel Belnap, Joe Camp, Richard Gale, James Garson, Dan Isaacson, Jeffrey King, John McDowell, and John Perry for asking searching questions and making many useful suggestions.

The first version of Chapter 4 was dashed off in the autumn of 1987. I had never really thought that nonextensional contexts created any problem for the Russellian; but Dagfinn Føllesdal and John Perry convinced me that it would be rash to just assume this and that it was important to spell out in detail why I was not afraid to join those who permit quantification into modal contexts and those who have faith in the Russellian account of *de re-de dicto* ambiguities as the products of scope permutations. Parts of this chapter were presented in talks on modality and events given at MIT, Stanford, and Berkeley in the fall of 1989.

While at Stanford I received valuable advice and much-needed support from a number of people, including John Barwise, Johann van

Bentham, Paddy Blanchette, Joan Bresnan, Sylvain Bromberger, Mark Crimmins, Adrian Cussins, John Etchemendy, Dagfinn Føllesdal, Jonathan Franklin, Paul Grice, Stuart Hampshire, David Israel, Martin Jones, Trip McCrossin, David Magnus, Julius Moravcsik, John Perry, Justine Rosenheck, Stanley Peters, Jamie Rucker, Ivan Sag, Nicola Stronach, Leora Weitzman, Tom Wasow, and Ed Zalta.

I have spent much of the last year and a half rewriting the dissertation as a book. Three points about my writing should be mentioned. The first point is relatively minor: I have not been especially careful about use and mention (except where necessary) and for the most part I have used single quotes where others might have been tempted to use corner quotes.

Second, despite the conceptual and technical complexity of some of the issues addressed, I have attempted to present all of the material in a form that might be useful to upper-level undergraduate students in philosophy. Writing in this way has forced me to clarify certain issues in my own mind and has (to some extent) prevented me from proceeding too quickly and making several nontrivial assumptions. It has also given me the chance to produce a book I could use at certain points in a first course on the philosophy of language. Drafts of Chapters 2, 3, and 4 were, in fact, used in such a course at Princeton in the spring of 1989, and I am very grateful to a number of students who gave me tips for improving the presentation. Inevitably, the result of writing in this way is a work that may drag in places for the professional philosopher.

The third point about my writing concerns the possibly excessive number of notes and references. With an eye to readability, I have relegated a fair number of historical, technical, and linguistic remarks and other clutter to the notes gathered at the end of each chapter. Some of the notes are self-contained; others expand upon points in the main text, entertain alternative hypotheses, or point to other parts of the text or to other notes; still others contain only references; *all* of them can be ignored on a first pass.

I have gone to some lengths to trace ideas where appropriate, and this has led to several amusing episodes with colleagues. I was pleased when I found a distinction between quantificational and referential interpretations of descriptions in Rundle (1965), published a year before Donnellan's (1966) influential paper. Martin Davies then drew my attention to a similar distinction in Mitchell (1962). Several weeks later, John Perry directed me to a related distinction in Marcus (1961). I then discovered that Geach (1962) and Hampshire (1959) had both anticipated and responded to a potential referential challenge. But then François Recanati undercut my efforts by tracing

the distinction to the theological writings of the seventeenth-century French philosopher Antoine Arnauld.

I had assumed for some time that the earliest mention of the idea that descriptions might be treated as restricted quantifiers (or that the determiner 'the' might be treated as a binary quantifier) was due to Grice (1969). David Lewis pointed out to me that the same point was made by Sharvy (1969). An excursion into David's filing system unearthed several unpublished papers and some lecture notes from the mid-to-late 1960s that made use of the same idea. References in these papers and notes finally led me to Prior (1963), which, as far as I have been able to ascertain, is the earliest published source.

In response to a question from Johann van Benthem at a summer meeting of the ASL in Granada, I came up with what I thought was an interesting and novel solution to one of the main problems involving so-called "donkey" anaphora. Modifying Gareth Evans's theory of "E-type" anaphora, I suggested that unbound pronouns anaphoric on indefinite descriptions and universally quantified phrases might go proxy for number-neutral definite descriptions. In the autumn, I wrote a paper in which I explored this idea. I sent a copy to Martin Davies and received a letter back inviting me to look at p. 175 of his book, where, in passing, he had made the same suggestion (for indefinite descriptions). Later Jim Higginbotham traced the same idea to a circulated but unpublished paper by Terry Parsons (1978). (No doubt Recanati is at this moment wading through musty theological manuscripts. . . .)

At Princeton I have received valuable comments and suggestions from Jeremy Butterfield, Bob Freidin, Gil Harman, Richard Holton, David Lewis, Saul Kripke, Michaelis Michael, Scott Soames, Dan Sperber, and Nancy Worman. I am also grateful to Princeton University for granting me a leave for the academic year 1989-90, the first semester of which was used, in part, to put the finishing touches to this project.

A graduate seminar on anaphora that I taught with Scott Soames had a significant impact on the rewriting of Chapters 5 and 6. Very special thanks must go to Scott and to Peter Ludlow and Martin Davies for helping me to work out some of the details of the account of descriptive anaphora examined in those chapters, and for taking the trouble to read through the entire manuscript and provide me with detailed written comments. I am also indebted to Irene Heim, James Higginbotham, Jeffrey King, and Richard Larson for written comments on various portions of the manuscript.

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