Chapter 1

Introduction

It seems clear that we are capable of entertaining thoughts about particular objects or individuals. It seems equally clear that on various occasions, and for a variety of reasons, we desire to express some of these thoughts, and that we are capable of doing so by uttering sentences of subject-predicate form, such as the following:

(1) Lisa is asleep
(2) Modena is less than one hundred miles from Bologna
(3) I'm tired
(4) You don't look well
(5) This vase is chipped
(6) That's a spider.

On the face of it, the following sentences also look like good candidates, but as we shall see, appearances can be deceptive:

(7) My mother is British
(8) The man in the gabardine suit is a spy
(9) A man I met in the pub last night gave me a hundred pounds
(10) Lisa's departure caused me great distress.

The particular thought (or thoughts) I can be said to have expressed on a given occasion will be a function of the words I have used and their syntactical organization. In each of sentences 1–10, there seems to be a natural division between the grammatical *subject* and the grammatical *predicate*. Abstracting away from indexical and other context-dependent features of language for the moment, we might paint the following picture: For a sentence '*b* is *G*', where '*b*' is a singular noun phrase and '— is *G*' a monadic predicate phrase, '*b*' refers to an individual *b*, and '— is *G*' predicates something of *b*. In the parlance of truth-conditional semantics, '*b*' refers to *b*, and '*b* is *G*' is true if and only if *b* is *G*. On this account, we might say that

the thought (or proposition) expressed by an utterance of '*b* is *G*' is *about b*, i.e., about the referent of '*b*'.

But there are sentences of grammatically subject-predicate form that do not function in this way. Anselm worried about *Nihil me docuit volare* ('Nothing taught me to fly'); Lewis Carroll worried about 'Nobody walks faster than I do'. Related worries surface with 'Some politicians will lie to get elected' and 'All men are mortal'. Since there is no clear sense in which the grammatical subjects of any of these sentences refers to a particular individual (of which a certain thing is predicated), there would appear to be no prospect of providing a uniform semantical treatment of noun phrases in natural language. This was something that Frege saw, and he invented a theory—quantification theory—that enabled him to treat these *grammatically* subject-predicate sentences as having no *logical* subjects. In effect, Frege's *quantificational* analyses of such sentences was the inauguration of the modern tradition of distinguishing between *grammatical* and *logical* form.

Frege handed us an intuitive, semantically significant distinction between two classes of noun phrases: the class of singular referring expressions and the class of quantifiers. (For the purposes of this chapter, we can pass over the fact that Frege's quantifiers are unrestricted and that a distinction must therefore be drawn between *quantifiers* and *quantified noun phrases*; see 2.5.) But how, exactly, are we to decide to which category any particular noun phrase belongs? In English, the morphological and syntactical differences between singular and plural are imperfect guides. First, there is the annoying fact that 'all men', 'some men', and 'no men' are syntactically plural, whereas 'every man', 'some man', and 'no man' are syntactically singular; yet it is obvious that the latter are just as much quantifiers as the former. Having granted ourselves the discretionary power (in such "obvious" cases) to classify certain syntactically singular noun phrases as quantifiers, it might be thought that all other singular noun phrases are referring expressions: proper names ('Lisa', 'Bologna'), personal and impersonal pronouns ('she', 'her', 'herself', 'you', 'it'), demonstrative pronouns ('this', 'that'), definite descriptions ('the man in the gabardine suit', 'the table'), indefinite descriptions ('a man I met in the pub last night', 'a friend of mine'), demonstrative descriptions ('that man in the corner', 'this vase'), and nominalizations of one form or another ('Lisa's departure', 'Nixon's resigning'). However, there are some important philosophical and linguistic differences between these categories, and when they are explored, compared, and refined, difficult choices have to be made concerning the nature of the relation between certain expressions

belonging to one or other grouping, and those objects to which they are taken to refer.

Russell's analyses of definite descriptions (phrases of the form 'the so-and-so') and indefinite descriptions (phrases of the form 'a so-and-so') mark the modern beginnings of this sort of concern.[1] For it was Russell who first took exception to viewing this intuitive class of singular noun phrases as a unified *semantical* category. According to Russell, where *'b'* is a genuine referring expression (a "logically proper name"), the picture presented above is correct. The sole function of a referring expression is to pick out an object. If that object satisfies the predicate of the sentence, then the sentence is true; or rather the *thought* or *proposition*—I shall use these terms interchangeably—expressed by an utterance of the sentence is true. If the referent of *'b'* does not satisfy the predicate, then it is false.

But how are we to treat definite descriptions like 'the largest prime number', 'the present King of France', and 'the Fountain of Youth', to which nothing answers? We can certainly make meaningful assertions by employing sentences containing such expressions:

(11) There is no such thing as the largest prime number
(12) The largest prime number is greater than 10^{29}
(13) Ralph thinks the largest prime number is greater than 10^{29}
(14) Jane wants to marry the present King of France
(15) John has never seen the present King of France
(16) The King of France does not exist
(17) Ponce de Leon searched for the Fountain of Youth.

One approach to these sentences would be to posit a realm of nonexistent entities to serve as the referents of the descriptions they contain; indeed, this is an approach that Russell once took.[2] But by 1905 he felt that this position was "intolerable," and the Theory of Descriptions emerged, in part, as part of Russell's desire to purify his ontology. According to Russell, if a putative referring expression *'b'* can be supposed not to refer, yet a sentence containing *'b'* still be supposed to express a determinate thought, then *'b'* cannot be a genuine referring expression.[3] Whenever we encounter such a situation, the *Theory of Descriptions* is to be wheeled out and the sentence given a logical parsing in which there is no genuine "subject." For the whole purpose of the Theory of Descriptions is to make available a special class of *object-independent* thoughts. A genuine referring expression *'b'* may be combined with a (monadic) predicate expression to express an *object-dependent* thought, a thought that simply could not be expressed or even entertained if the object referred to by *'b'* did not exist. A definite description 'the *F*', by contrast, although it *may*

in fact be satisfied by a unique object x, can be combined with a (monadic) predicate to express a thought that is not contingent upon the existence of x.[4] For descriptions, on Russell's account, belong with the quantifiers—what he calls *denoting* phrases—and not with the referring expressions.[5]

Informally, we may state the main thesis of the Theory of Descriptions thus: If 'the F' is a definite description and '— is G' a monadic predicate phrase, then the proposition expressed by an utterance of 'the F is G' is logically equivalent to the proposition expressed by an utterance of 'there is one and only one F, and everything that is F is G'.[6] And this proposition is object-independent, in the sense that there is no object for which 'the F' stands, upon which the existence of the proposition depends.

What, then, is the philosophical significance of this theory? Of course it can be seen as a contribution to a purely semantical project, that of constructing an empirically adequate theory of meaning for natural language. Indeed, one of my aims in this essay is to provide a clear characterization of this contribution. I want to suggest that the Theory of Descriptions has application well beyond the sorts of phrases and constructions Russell dealt with. Indeed, if (*i*) all descriptions are quantifiers, and (*ii*) the domain of application of the Theory of Descriptions is as broad as I suggest it is, then it is at least arguable that every natural language noun phrase is either a quantifier or a referring expression.

While the semantical project is undoubtedly an important and interesting one, it should be emphasized that Russell's primary concerns lay elsewhere. The Theory of Descriptions was originally conceived as a contribution to metaphysical and psychological projects, and to that extent it was a tool with which to dissolve certain philosophical puzzles. For instance, the theory is supposed to give us a way of characterizing the thoughts expressed by sentences like (11)–(17). It is plain that perfectly determinate thoughts may be expressed by utterances of these sentences despite the fact that they contain nondenoting descriptions. Because it treats descriptions as complex existential quantifiers rather than referring expressions, the Theory of Descriptions gave Russell the power to explain this fact without positing a realm of nonexistent objects. (Russell also considered the Theory of Descriptions to be the first important breakthrough in his quest to solve the set-theoretic paradoxes.)

The Theory of Descriptions also played an important role in Russell's epistemology. Russell was so committed to the view that there could be no illusion of entertaining an object-dependent thought when, in reality, there was no actual object that the purported thought was

about, that he was led to the thesis that only a sense-datum could be trusted as the "subject" of such a thought. Because of the close connection between his theory of thought and his semantics, this led Russell to the view that the proposition expressed by an utterance of a sentence consisting of an ordinary proper name combined with a monadic predicate could not be object-dependent. And by treating names as "disguised" descriptions, he was able to provide an analysis of such sentences as expressing object-independent propositions.

Russell was not the last philosopher to wield the Theory of Descriptions as a philosophical tool. It has been appealed to many times by philosophical logicians, particularly those defending the coherence of quantified modal and epistemic logics. Arthur Smullyan (1948), for example, has argued that Quine's (1943, 1953) attacks on quantified modal logic turn on a failure to see that, *qua* quantifiers, definite descriptions lie beyond the domain of application of the *Principle of Substitutivity*. In my opinion Smullyan thoroughly discredits Quine's attempts to demonstrate the incoherence of quantified modal logic. However, the debate continues to the present day because Quine and others have misunderstood Russell and failed to appreciate the main points of Smullyan's paper. This matter is addressed in detail in Chapter 4. Attention to the scope of descriptions in nonextensional contexts and to matters of substitutivity is often crucial in metaphysics and in the philosophy of mind and action where definite and indefinite descriptions of events and actions are common currency. In Chapter 4, I shall also indicate why I think that some confusion in recent discussions of event identity has arisen through inattention to the logical forms of sentences containing descriptions of events. The Theory of Descriptions is, then, of interest not only to the project of constructing a semantical theory for natural language but also as a useful tool with which to investigate the logical structures of certain philosophical claims.

Many of the popular objections to the Theory of Descriptions have their roots in Strawson's (1950) "On Referring." Underlying each of Strawson's objections is the belief that descriptions are genuine referring expressions and that to insist otherwise is just to misunderstand the function of singular noun phrases in communication. Now it is surely not open to dispute that a sentence of the form 'the *F* is *G*' may be used to *communicate* an object-dependent thought to someone to the effect that some particular individual *b* is *G*. This might be because a particular description is associated in some way with a particular *proper name*, or because it could be associated, in the context in question, with a particular *demonstrative*. On the first count, Marcus (1961) has pointed out that over a period of time a descrip-

tion may actually come to be used as a proper name—as "an identifying tag"—its descriptive meaning "lost or ignored" ('The evening star' and 'the Prince of Denmark' are two of her examples). On the second count, Donnellan (1966) has exploited examples like the following. Suppose you and I are at a party together and both notice a man standing alone in the far corner; I also notice that he is trying to attract your attention, so I say to you, "The man in the far corner is trying to attract your attention." Here I might be said to be using the definite description 'the man in the far corner' *referentially*, in the sense that I intend to *communicate* an object-dependent thought (about that very man) rather than (or rather than *just*) an object-independent thought to the effect that the unique satisfier of a certain descriptive condition also satisfies some other condition. (Similar cases can be constructed involving *in*definite descriptions.)

No one, I take it, contests the phenomenon of referential usage. But there is considerable disagreement as to the *significance* of this phenomenon when it comes to the construction of a semantical theory. A number of philosophers have argued that where a description is used referentially, we must reject Russell's object-independent truth conditions. On Russell's account, an utterance of 'the *F* is *G*', is true just in case there is some entity *x* such that *x* is uniquely *F* and *x* is *G*. But according to Russell's opponent, when 'the *F*' is being used referentially, the truth-conditions make no mention of any uniquely descriptive condition. In such a case 'the *F*' is functioning as a singular referring expression: it is being used to refer to some particular individual *b*; and the utterance is therefore true just in case *b* is *G*. It is suggested, in short, that descriptions are *semantically ambiguous* between quantificational and referential *interpretations*.

The ambiguity theory has been spelled out and endorsed in one form or another by Rundle, Donnellan, Stalnaker, Partee, Peacocke, Hornsby, Kaplan, Devitt, Wettstein, Recanati, Fodor and Sag, and Barwise and Perry.[7] Although there are a variety of theoretical differences in the way these philosophers have accommodated referential usage, there are two theses most of them seem to hold (or to have held): (*i*) Russell's analysis does not provide a correct account of the proposition expressed by an utterance of a sentence containing a description used referentially; and (*ii*) a correct account will be stated in terms of an object-dependent proposition, the character of which will depend upon the identity of the 'referent' of the description, as used on that occasion (in the simplest cases, this will just be the unique object satisfying the description).

The typical response from those sympathetic to Russell appeals to an intuitive but tricky distinction between *semantics* and *pragmatics*.

In our daily talk we very often convey things indirectly, relying on what we take to be our interlocutors' abilities (innate or learned) to grasp (see, deduce) what *we* mean by our utterances. But this does not force the semanticist to build the range of messages it is possible to convey by using a given sentence into the semantics of the sentence itself. This point of view has been most clearly articulated by people like Grice and Searle.[8] Indeed, the first published defence of a unitary Russellian analysis of descriptions in the face of the referential challenge was, I believe, the one sketched by Grice towards the end of his 1969 paper "Vacuous Names."[9] Grice's idea is to appeal to an antecedently motivated distinction between what a speaker *says* (the proposition expressed) and what the speaker *means* (what the speaker seeks to communicate to the hearer). According to Grice, the truth-conditions of an utterance of a sentence of the form 'the *F* is *G*' are strictly Russellian, even if 'the *F*' is used referentially. The speaker may, however, wish to get it across to the hearer that a particular individual *b* is *G*, and may succeed in doing this by (e.g.) exploiting the fact that both speaker and hearer take *b* to be the *F*. While the proposition that *b* is *G* may well be part of what is *meant*, Grice suggests, it is not the proposition actually expressed (what is *said*, as he puts it), nor is it a consequence of that proposition.

This strategy has been articulated and defended by Kripke, Searle, Klein, and Davies.[10] These philosophers hold (or have held) something like the following two theses: (*i*) Russell's analysis gives a (more or less) correct account of the proposition expressed by an utterance of a sentence containing a description, even when the description is used referentially; and (*ii*) the fact that we may communicate object-dependent propositions by using description-containing sentences is to be accounted for by a theory of communication, speaker's meaning, or speech acts, not by a semantical theory. Let's call this the *pragmatic* account of referential usage.

One of my aims in this essay is to defend the Theory of Descriptions as a genuine contribution to the semantics of natural language. This will involve deflecting several distinct arguments against the unitary Russellian analysis that have gained some currency over the years. In my opinion, none of these arguments has any real force; indeed, I shall attempt to show that each involves substantial confusion and outright error. I shall also attempt to undercut the ambiguity theory by presenting a clear and explicit statement of the pragmatic account of referential usage and explaining its advantages and strengths.

A second aim is to delimit the domain of application of the Theory of Descriptions. I shall suggest that the theory can (and should) be extended to: (*i*) *plural* descriptions like 'the men in the corner', (*ii*) *numberless* descriptions like 'whoever shot John F. Kennedy', (*iii*) *possessives* like 'Smith's murderer' and 'his dog', (*iv*) *indexical* descriptions like 'my mother' and 'that man's bicycle', (*v*) *relativized* descriptions like 'the father of each girl' and 'each girl's father', (*vi*) *derived nominal* constructions like 'Mary's departure', and (*vii*) *gerundive nominal* constructions like 'my leaving in such a hurry'. All of these will be pulled into the descriptive camp and provided with plausible Russellian analyses.[11]

A complete semantical theory for a language like English will undoubtedly be composed of various interacting subtheories, such as theories of reference (subsuming theories of names and demonstratives), quantification, mass terms, indexicality, anaphora, conditionals, nominalization, adverbial modification, tense, aspect, ellipsis, modality, attitude reports, nonassertive speech acts, and so on. From a methodological standpoint we have no alternative to proceeding in a modular fashion, attempting to find a phenomenon that is to some suitable extent isolable, open to investigation in abstraction from various other phenomena. We can then construct a theory of the phenomenon we are interested in and begin to look at its predictive power, particularly as it interacts with theories of other isolable phenomena.

I am going to take this methodological strategy very seriously. Indeed, one underlying theme will be that many of the alleged difficulties for the Theory of Descriptions are not really difficulties that concern descriptions *per se*. They are either reflexes of more general issues in the theory of quantification, or else the products of the inevitable complexities that emerge when one takes into account descriptions in constructions (or linguistic contexts) that have their own semantical or syntactical problems (and hence fall under their own semantical subtheories), or some combination of both. The moral that will (I hope) emerge is that the Theory of Descriptions interacts in a variety of interesting and powerful ways with theories of (e.g.) indexicality, ellipsis, syntactical structure, anaphora, modality, tense, and attitude reports. (I shall not, of course, attempt to work out the precise details of the various theories with which the Theory of Descriptions must interact.)

A third aim is to push to its limits one plausible way of thinking about the semantical content of anaphoric pronouns, and to explain the role of the Theory of Descriptions within a general theory of anaphora. It is plausible to suppose that both nonanaphoric (e.g.,

deictic) pronouns and pronouns anaphoric on referring expressions are themselves referring expressions. Following Geach (1962) and Quine (1960), philosophers have tended to treat pronouns with quantified antecedents ('every man', 'few Englishmen', and so on) as the natural language analogues of the variables of quantification theory. However, Evans (1977, 1980) has demonstrated conclusively that a very natural class of pronouns anaphoric on quantifiers cannot be interpreted as bound variables. With the help of some elementary ideas from contemporary grammatical theory, Evans provided a syntactical characterization of a semantically necessary distinction between bound and unbound anaphoric pronouns; he then argued that unbound pronouns anaphoric on quantifiers are interpreted via definite descriptions recoverable from the clauses containing their antecedents. This theory certainly has a lot to recommend it. However, as several philosophers and linguists have pointed out, it has some major defects, and in Chapters 5 and 6 I shall argue for a derivative theory that is, I believe, both technically superior and of greater explanatory value. *En route*, the derivative theory will be used to defuse some influential arguments against Russellian interpretations of certain occurrences of descriptions. The theory will also be tested on a variety of anaphoric puzzles that have been widely discussed by philosophers, logicians, and linguists.

A fourth aim is to use the Theory of Descriptions as a philosophical tool for dealing with certain problems concerning events, although most of what I would like to say on this topic will have to wait for another occasion.

The essay is organized as follows.

Chapter 2 concerns the philosophical and formal foundations of the Theory of Descriptions. Particular emphasis is placed on the distinction between object-dependent and object-independent thoughts that lies at the heart of Russell's psychology in the period with which I am concerned (1905–1919). The formal statement of Russell's theory is then located within a general account of natural language quantification that treats descriptions as restricted quantifiers. The theory is then extended to nonsingular descriptions and more complex types of descriptions.

Chapter 3 concerns context. The Theory of Descriptions is first supplemented with a theory of indexicality. A broadly Gricean distinction between the proposition expressed and those propositions the speaker seeks to convey is defended. Following Grice and Kripke, this work is then used to account for various ways in which descriptions may be used in different communicative settings. In

particular, two influential arguments for a semantically distinct referential interpretation of descriptions are disarmed.

In Chapter 4, I turn to matters of scope, substitutivity, and opacity. Typically, Russellians have accounted for the *de re–de dicto* distinction, as it occurs in sentences containing descriptions and nonextensional operators, in terms of scope permutations. But this means quantifying into nonextensional contexts, and Quine has argued that such "unbridled" quantification leads to incoherence. After examining a common misunderstanding about descriptions and the Principle of Substitutivity, I examine Quine's argument against quantifying into modal contexts and conclude, with Smullyan, that the argument turns on an illegitimate technical move that is intimately connected to the aforementioned misunderstanding about descriptions and substitutivity. I then defend Smullyan from objections raised by Quine and others before turning briefly to attitude contexts. Finally, the Theory of Descriptions is extended to cover descriptions of events and used to examine certain claims about event identity.

Chapters 5 and 6 concern the semantics of anaphoric pronouns, particularly those whose antecedents are quantifiers, such as definite and indefinite descriptions. It might be thought excessive to devote two chapters to anaphoric pronouns, but to the philosopher, the linguist, the logician, and even the native speaker they are words of very great importance. Several philosophers have presented arguments designed to show that definite and indefinite descriptions functioning as the antecedents of certain occurrences of pronouns cannot be treated quantificationally. I explore a quite general theory of the semantics of anaphoric pronouns that seems to cover all of the relevant data as well as some long-standing anaphoric puzzles.

Notes

1. See Russell (1905, 1919). The pretense that all definite descriptions begin with the word 'the' will be dropped in due course.
2. See Russell (1903). See also Meinong (1904).
3. See Whitehead and Russell (1927), p. 66.
4. This particular way of thinking about the distinction between definite descriptions and genuine referring expressions is clearly articulated in the works of Gareth Evans and John McDowell. See, in particular, Evans (1982), chaps. 2 and 9, and McDowell (1986). See also Blackburn (1984).
5. Russell (1905), p. 41. The word 'denote' has been used by philosophers, linguists, and logicians to express a variety of relations that hold between linguistic and nonlinguistic objects. For Russell, 'denotes' is best understood as 'describes', 'is satisfied by', or 'is true of'. Thus 'the present

Queen of England' denotes/is satisfied by/is true of Elizabeth Windsor. For Russell, it is the *descriptive condition* rather than the denotation that does the semantical work. (I am here grateful to David Wiggins for discussion.)

6. This is somewhat simplified; the Theory of Descriptions is not just offered as providing analyses of sentences with descriptions in subject position. Russell's formal statement makes it clear that the theory has a much broader application. For discussion, see 2.3 and 2.6.

7. See Rundle (1965), Donnellan (1966, 1968, 1978), Stalnaker (1972), Partee (1972), Peacocke (1975), Hornsby (1977), Kaplan (1978), Devitt (1981), Wettstein (1981, 1982), Recanati (1981, 1986, 1989), Fodor and Sag (1982), and Barwise and Perry (1983).

8. See especially Grice (1967) and Searle (1975).

9. The general form of the Gricean response to a potential referential challenge seems to have been anticipated by Hampshire (1959, pp. 201–4) and by Geach (1962, p. 8).

10. See Kripke (1977), Searle (1979), Klein (1980), and Davies (1981). This general approach is also endorsed by Wiggins (1975), Castañeda (1977), Sainsbury (1979), Evans (1982), Salmon (1982), Blackburn (1984), Davidson (1986), and Soames (1986).

11. I had originally planned to include an appendix on the prospects of unifying the account of (i)–(vi) with an account of the interpretation of *mass noun* descriptions (like 'the water') and so-called "collective" interpretations of plural descriptions (as in 'the men pushed the VW up the hill'), an idea first presented by Sharvy (1980). It soon became clear, however, that within the confines of the present work it would not be possible to do justice either to the semantical and metaphysical subtleties involved in spelling out such a unified theory or to the burgeoning literature on these topics. The proper place for such a discussion is in a sequel rather than an appendix.