Why Incomplete Definite Descriptions do not Defeat Russell's Theory of Descriptions

Scott Soames

RESUMEN

Para Russell, una oración simple que contenga una descripción, ⌈el F⌉, es verdadera sólo si un único objeto satisface a F. Las oraciones que contienen descripciones incompletas plantean problemas porque a menudo se usan para expresar verdades, a pesar de que más de una cosa en el dominio de discurso satisface a F. Arguyo (i) que los análisis no russellianos no pueden resolver estos problemas; y (ii) que los análisis russellianos sí pueden, a condición de que se adopte una concepción nueva del significado y de la aserción. Según esta concepción, el significado de una oración S es lo que es común a lo aseverado por proferencias de S en todos los contextos normales, y se exige que las proposiciones aseveradas por proferencias particulares sean enriquecimientos pragmáticos del contenido semántico de S. Estos enriquecimientos pragmáticos son las proposiciones que los hablantes tienen intención de aseverar de forma principal. La proposición semánticamente expresada por S cuenta como aseverada sólo cuando es una consecuencia necesaria *a priori* de la aserción principal del hablante, en conjunción con presuposiciones de la conversación. El problema de las descripciones incompletas se resuelve al poner de manifiesto que las proposiciones falsas semánticamente expresadas no son consecuencia de las proposiciones verdaderas pragmáticamente enriquecidas que el hablante asevera.

ABSTRACT

For Russell, a simple sentence containing a description, ⌈the F⌉, is true only if a single object satisfies F. Sentences containing incomplete descriptions pose problems because they are often used to express truths, even though more than one thing in the discourse satisfies F. It is argued (i) that non-Russellian analyses cannot solve these problems, and (ii) that Russellian analyses can, provided that a new conception of meaning and assertion is adopted. On this conception, the meaning of S is what is common to what is asserted by utterances of S in all normal contexts, and the propositions asserted by particular utterances are required to be pragmatic enrichments of the semantic content of S. These pragmatic enrichments are the propositions speakers primarily intend to assert. The proposition semantically expressed by S counts as asserted only when it is a necessary, a priori consequence of the speaker's primary assertion, plus presuppositions of the conversation. The problem of incomplete descriptions is solved by noting that the false propositions semantically expressed are not consequences of the true, pragmatically enriched propositions the speaker asserts.

INTRODUCTION

A central lesson of "On Denoting," is that singular definite descriptions do not belong to the same category of expressions as names and demonstratives; they are not singular terms [Russell (1905)]. Instead, sentences containing them are quantificational. As a result, the meanings, or semantic contents, of these sentences are not singular propositions about objects denoted by the descriptions they contain. Instead, they are general propositions in which higher-order properties corresponding to quantifiers are ascribed to lower-order properties, or propositional functions, expressed by the formulas on which the quantifiers operate. Thus, the official Russellian analysis of (1a) is (1b), the content of which is the proposition informally given in (1c).

(1a) The F is G

(1b) $\exists x \, [\forall y \, (Fy \leftrightarrow y = x) \, \& \, Gx]$

(1c) The property of being both G and uniquely F is instantiated.
    (or, the propositional function which assigns to any object o the proposition that o is both G and uniquely F "is sometimes true")

On Russell's original view, definite descriptions are syncategorematical. Although there is a rule determining the contribution made by a description, ⌐the F⌐, to propositions expressed by sentences containing it, this grammatical constituent is not assigned any independent semantic content on its own, and the proposition semantically expressed by (1a) contains no constituent corresponding to it. For our purposes, this feature of the view can be dropped, without significant loss. The most interesting and important features of Russell's analysis can be retained, along with a welcome gain in generality, by including ⌐the F⌐ in the category of generalized quantifiers, such as ⌐every F⌐, ⌐some F⌐, and ⌐most F's⌐. On this, modified, Russellian analysis, ⌐the F⌐ can be thought of as expressing the property of being instantiated by whatever uniquely instantiates the property expressed by F (or of being a propositional function that assigns a true proposition to whatever object o uniquely satisfies F). The analysis given in (1) is then replaced by that given in (2).

(2a) The F is G

(2b) [the x: Fx] Gx

(2c) Being G is instantiated by whatever uniquely instantiates the property of being F

> (or, the propositional function which assigns to any object o the proposition that o is G assigns a truth to whatever object uniquely satisfies F)

It is this modified and improved Russellian analysis that I will defend against the problem posed by occurrences of incomplete definite descriptions like 'the car' in sentences such as (3a).

(3a) I parked the car just behind some cars across the street

(3b) [the x: x is a car] I parked x just behind some cars across the street

Intuitively, the problem is obvious. Although the apparent Russellian reading, (3b), of (3a), couldn't possibly be true — since it requires both that there be one and only one car x (in the universe of discourse) and also that I parked x behind some other cars across the street — my utterance of (3a) might, nevertheless, be completely unproblematic, and result in the assertion of something true, and nothing false. Examples like this are extremely common. If they cannot be accommodated, then Russell's theory of descriptions must be regarded as incapable of providing adequate semantic analyses of many sentences of ordinary English, and other natural languages.

The seriousness of this challenge to Russell's theory can be measured by the reaction to it of one of the theory's most prominent recent defenders. Writing in defence of the theory against objections originating in Keith Donnellan's distinction between attributive and referential uses of descriptions, Saul Kripke says the following:

> If I were to be asked for a tentative stab about Russell, I would say that although his theory does a far better job of handling ordinary discourse than many have thought, and although many popular arguments against it are inconclusive, probably it ultimately fails. The considerations I have in mind have to do with the existence of "improper" definite descriptions, such as "the table," where uniquely specifying conditions are not contained in the description itself. Contrary to the Russellian picture, I doubt that such descriptions can always be regarded as elliptical with some uniquely specifying conditions added [Kripke (1977), p. 6].

My burden will be to show that Kripke's worry can be laid to rest; the existence of incomplete, or "improper" definite descriptions does *not* defeat Russell's theory, when taken as a semantic account of ordinary English.

I. THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

(4a) The book is on the table

(4b) I drove the car to work

(4c) The student got into an argument with a student from another school

(4d) The murderer must be insane

The problem posed by sentences containing incomplete descriptions, like those in (4), is that speakers who assertively utter them often succeed in saying something that is both germane and true, while avoiding the assertion of anything false — despite the fact that the literal meanings, or semantic contents, assigned to these sentences by a Russellian semantic theory appear, quite clearly, to be false (due to the fact that the description fails to pick out an object uniquely). If these contents are, indeed, false, then the Russellian needs to explain both how it is that something other than the semantic content of the sentence gets asserted, and why, even if something else is asserted, the semantic content of the sentence uttered is not asserted as well.

One of the things that makes this challenge difficult is a plausible, and widely presupposed, conception of the relationship between meaning and semantic content, on the one hand, and assertion, on the other. As a first approximation, we may express this principle as follows:

> *The Traditional Connection Between Meaning, Semantic Content and Assertion*
> A sincere, reflective, competent speaker who assertively utters S (speaking literally, nonironically, and nonmetaphorically) in a context C says (or asserts), perhaps among other things, the proposition semantically expressed by S in C (also known as *the semantic content of S in C*).[1]

Suppose that this principle is correct, and that a speaker who assertively utters ⌈The F is G⌉ in a context C, in which its Russellian analysis is false, nevertheless succeeds in saying something both germane and true, while avoiding the assertion of anything false. If such cases are genuine, they constitute a powerful argument against a purely Russellian treatment of descriptions. To rebut the argument one would have to show that the cases aren't really counterexamples to Russell — either because (i) the principle connecting semantic content and assertion is incorrect, or because (ii) the proposition expressed by the Russellian analysis of ⌈The F is G⌉ is actually true, not false, in C, or because (iii), the speaker in C has, in fact, said something false, even though he may also have said something true.

Since, heretofore, none of these options, or any combination of them, has seemed sufficient to handle all relevant cases, the idea has gained currency that sentences containing incomplete definite descriptions are semantically ambiguous between attributive, Russellian readings, on which the descriptions are

generalized quantifiers, and demonstrative, or referential, readings, in which ⌜the F⌝ (semantically) refers to the contextually salient object that satisfies F — in a manner analogous to the way in which ⌜this F⌝ does. [2] On this story, when I use (3a) to talk about the particular car c that I have been driving, the singular proposition that I parked c just behind some cars across the street is both the semantic content of the sentence uttered, in the context, and also the proposition asserted. No wonder that I both assert something true, and say nothing false. On this approach, we posit special non-Russellian, semantic readings of sentences containing incomplete descriptions in order to preserve both the traditional connection between meaning, semantic content and assertion, and our intuitions about what speakers do, and do not, assert when they utter sentences containing such descriptions. This, I shall argue, is a mistake.

II. WHY INCOMPLETE DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS ARE NOT SEMANTICALLY REFERENTIAL

There are four main considerations that tell against the view that sentences containing incomplete definite descriptions have semantically referential readings. The first arises from the fact that the distinction between complete and incomplete definite descriptions is nonlinguistic. Since, in most cases, the question of whether there is more than one thing that satisfies F is a nonlinguistic one about what exists in the world, there is no way, within linguistic theory, to identify which descriptions are complete, and which incomplete. Thus, if linguistic theory is to assign semantically referential meanings to incomplete definite descriptions, it must assign such meanings to all definite descriptions — which is defensible only if all such descriptions are semantically ambiguous. But there is no case to be made for a universal ambiguity of this sort.

The second difficulty is that the semantically referential account mischaracterizes the truth-conditional content of speakers' assertions. For example, if a speaker assertively utters (4c), 'The student got into an argument with a student from another school', in a context in which the incomplete description 'the student' is used to pick out a particular student s, then the semantic proposal identifies the singular proposition expressed by (SA4c) as *both* the semantic content of the sentence uttered, and the proposition asserted by the utterance.

    (SA4c) s got in a fight with a student from another school (where the semantic content of 's' is the individual it refers to)

However, this proposition does *not* exhaust the assertive content of the speaker's remark, since it leaves out the characterization of s as a student.[3]

That this is part of what the speaker asserts is indicated by the obvious truth of the reports, (R$_1$4c) and (R$_2$4c).

   (R$_1$4c) The speaker said the following: that a student got into an argu-
            ment with a student from another school

   (R$_2$4c) The speaker said that two students got into an argument

Thus, the semantic proposal fails to correctly characterize the data about assertion that motivates it.

   The third problem is that the approach doesn't generalize properly to instances of what have been called *referential uses* of descriptions, and other relevant terms.[4] In the case of descriptions, the most significant examples, for our purposes, are those in which a speaker uses what turns out to be an inaccurate description to pick out a certain individual, and say something about him. When I say, "The man in the corner drinking champagne is a famous philosopher," intending to single out what I take to be one particular, contextually salient, man m from a group including several men in the corner drinking champagne, I am using an incomplete description. If, in fact, m happens to be drinking Riesling, then we have a standard, Donnellan-type case of misdescription. As Donnellan famously pointed out, this does not prevent me from truly asserting, of m, that he is a famous philosopher. However, my ability to do this is *not* captured by the postulated semantically referential reading — since, according to that reading, m is the semantic content of the description in this context only if m *is* both a man in the corner drinking champagne, and the denotation intended by the speaker. This is problematic. We don't want one explanation for the assertion of the contextually determined singular proposition when the incomplete description, ⌈the F⌉, is a misdescription, and a different explanation for the case in which it is accurate. If one insists that the explanation *must* be semantic in both cases, then one must change the posited semantically referential interpretation of the description, so that F makes *no* contribution to the determination of the referent of the description in the context.

   This is implausible. It is hard to see why a normally compositional semantic theory should simply ignore the content clause of a description, on one of its readings. Moreover, we have already seen that F standardly *does* make a contribution to what is asserted by a speaker who uses the description in ⌈The F is G⌉ referentially. The defender of semantically referential readings of these sentences would have no hope of explaining this, if he were to take F as making *no* contribution to these readings, whatsoever. Thus, the proposed modification of the semantically referential interpretation must be rejected. If there are such interpretations, F contributes to them.

This means that the proponent of such interpretations is committed to giving a *semantic* explanation for a speaker's ability to use ⌈The F is G⌉ to assert, of o, that it has the property expressed by G, in cases in which o satisfies F, while offering a different, *pragmatic*, explanation of the speaker's ability to do the same thing in cases in which o turns out not to satisfy F. But surely, if a pragmatic explanation is going to be required anyway, it should be extended to both cases — thereby removing the central reason for positing semantically referential readings in the first place. This point is reinforced by Kripke's observation that cases of correct assertion, despite referential misdescription or misapplication, occur not only with definite descriptions, but also with names [Kripke (1979); see in particular pp. 14-15]. In Kripke's example two people see Smith in the distance and mistake him for Jones. The speaker says "Look, Jones is raking leaves," thereby saying something true about Smith, (and also something false about Jones). This fact is *not* explained by any semantic ambiguity, according to which, on one interpretation, names refer to their bearers, whereas on a second interpretation they refer to contextually salient individuals mistaken for their bearers. There is no ambiguity, and the required explanation is purely pragmatic. What is needed is one explanation of how, in all these cases (those involving misapplications of names, those involving misdescriptions of contextually salient individuals, and those involving correct, but partial or incomplete, descriptions of such individuals) speakers are able to assert truths that are *not* semantic contents of the sentences they utter. The postulation of semantically referential readings of descriptions cannot do this on its own. Nor, as we shall see, is it needed as part of a theory that does.

The final nail in the coffin of the semantically referential theory of incomplete descriptions comes from utterances of (4d) — "The murderer must be insane" — in which the incomplete description 'the murderer' is used *attributively* to refer to whoever turns out to be the one who committed a certain murder, in the absence of any *de re* belief, of a particular person p, that p is the murderer. Suppose, for example, that (4d) is uttered upon coming across the victim of an extraordinarily cruel and senseless murder. In such a case, the incomplete description 'the murderer' might well be elliptical for 'the murderer of him' said, demonstrating the body. In this case, the actual murderer of the man in question may be unknown, and the speaker need not be taken as asserting any singular proposition about that person. Since incomplete definite descriptions are not always used referentially, no semantically referential interpretation is capable of explaining all the data.

III. The Simple Russellian Treatment of Definite Descriptions

Putting aside the failed view that sentences containing incomplete descriptions have semantically referential interpretations, we return to the problem posed by these examples. The problem is the apparent mismatch between the Russellian semantic contents of these sentences and the propositions speakers assert by uttering them. Since this problem involves the way in which the information semantically encoded by sentences interacts with salient information in the contexts in which these sentences are used, the tools available for solving the problem come from both semantics and pragmatics. Three in particular stand out — the ability to vary the domain of quantification from one context to the next, the ability to use pragmatic maxims to force reinterpretation of a speaker's remarks, and the ability to use contextual information to supplement the semantic information encoded by expressions in a particular context.

The first of these is illustrated by an utterance of (4b) — 'I drove the car to work' — in a context in which there is only one car under consideration (and I drove it to work). Whether one regards the contextual determination of the domain of quantification to be a matter of context-sensitive semantics (so that the semantic contents of quantifiers vary from one context to the next), or a matter of pragmatic supplementation of a constant semantic content (which determines what speakers in different contexts assert), the phenomenon applies to quantifiers generally, and has nothing special to do with definite descriptions [Neale (1990), chapter 3, pp. 94-8]. Either way, the Russellian is free to invoke contextual determination of the domain of the quantifier to explain why, in the case imagined, I succeed in saying something true, and nothing false, when I utter (4b). I succeed because there is one and only one car in the contextually determined domain — even though the world as a whole contains many cars. This sort of case is relatively easy.

However, not all cases are so straightforward — as is evidenced by the fact that I may say something true, and nothing false, by assertively uttering (3a), 'I parked the car just behind some cars across the street', even though, in this case, the domain of discourse (and hence of quantification) clearly includes more than one car.[5] Here, something more than contextual determination of the domain seems to be at work.[6] It is natural to think that pragmatic reinterpretation and contextual supplementation may be involved. The idea goes something like this: The (Russellian) semantic content of (3a) in a context in which many cars are under discussion is the obvious falsehood that there is one and only one car in the domain of discourse, and I parked it just behind some cars across the street (which are also in the domain). Since it is evident to everyone in the conversation that this proposition is false, it is evident that it can't be what I, the speaker, am inviting my hearers to believe. Given the presumption that I am obeying the conversational maxim not to say

anything known to be false, one must, therefore, reinterpret my utterance. Instead of asserting the semantic content of the sentence uttered, I should be taken as having asserted some contextually obvious enrichment of it — such as the proposition that I parked the car belonging to me just behind some cars across the street.

On this story, the semantic content of the sentence I utter is false in the context of utterance. However, the normal presumption that I should be taken as asserting its semantic content is defeated by the obvious conversational implicature that I am not committing myself to, or inviting my hearers to believe, what we all recognize to be false. To determine the proposition I did assert, one appeals to salient background information about me and my car which is shared by the conversational participants. This information is used to pragmatically enrich the content of the description *the car*, so that its contribution to the proposition I asserted is the information explicitly carried by 'the car belonging to me'. The Simple Russellian Treatment of Incomplete Descriptions claims that all relevant cases can be handled in this way.

This account requires a small, but plausible and independently motivated, modification of our earlier principle stating the traditional connection between meaning, semantic content, and assertion. The needed modification goes roughly as follows.

> *The Traditional Connection Between Meaning, Semantic Content and Assertion:* 2
> A sincere, reflective, competent speaker who assertively utters S (speaking literally, nonironically, and nonmetaphorically) in a context C says (or asserts), perhaps among other things, the proposition p that is semantically expressed by S in C (also known as *the semantic content of S in C*) — provided that the presumption that the speaker intends to commit himself or herself to p (and to invite his or her audience to believe p) is not defeated by a conversational implicature to the contrary.

In addition to this modification, the Simple Russellian Treatment of Incomplete Descriptions also requires to the ability to pragmatically enrich the semantic content of an expression to arrive at the proposition asserted by a speaker who utters a sentence containing it. However, this, too, is independently motivated, and not unique to definite descriptions.

The generality of the proposed Russellian explanation of our use of incomplete definite descriptions is illustrated by the fact that it's central features apply to sentences containing quantifiers of all sorts.

(5a) No one knows that you and I are here

(5b) Everyone looks up to Larry

It is clear (i) that I can use (5a) without asserting the obvious falsehood that absolutely no one (including me and you) knows that we are here, and (ii) that I can use (5b) without asserting the incoherent proposition that everyone (in a domain of discourse that includes Larry) looks up to Larry. These facts parallel those involving incomplete definite descriptions. As in the case of (3a), the semantic contents of (5a) and (5b) in the relevant contexts are obviously false. Since this is evident to everyone in the conversation, it is also evident that they are *not* what I, the speaker, am inviting my hearers to believe. Given the presumption that I am obeying the conversational maxim not to say anything known to be false, I know that my hearers will reinterpret my utterance. Instead of asserting the semantic content of the sentence uttered, I will be taken to have asserted some contextually obvious enrichment of it — such as the propositions expressed by (6a) and (6b), relative to an assignment of a contextually obvious group to 'us' or 'them'.

> (6a) No one *but us* (i.e. no one *else*) knows that you and I are here. (where 'us' designates me and my audience)

> (6b) Everyone *of us / them* looks up to Larry (where 'us' or 'them' designates a group that doesn't include Larry)

Similar remarks apply to other examples. Thus, the proponent of the Simple Russellian Treatment of Incomplete Definite Descriptions can claim for it the virtue of requiring nothing in our semantic and pragmatic theories not already required by our use of other quantifiers.

IV. Worries about the Simple Russellian Treatment

Despite the attractiveness of this theory, there are worries suggesting that it is not quite right. The first inkling that something may be wrong is a worry about pragmatic reinterpretation. Unlike the examples given above, clear cases of pragmatic reinterpretation tend to be quite obvious; speaker-hearers recognize that the sentences uttered are literally false, and they know that they are being invited to come up with contextually obvious reinterpretations. For example, imagine that you and your friend Mary are listening to the remarks of a well-known campus orator, when Mary turns to you and says, "Norman really is God's fountain pen, isn't he?" On hearing this, you immediately realize that she can't be asserting the obvious falsehood semantically expressed by the sentence she utters — one which predicates of Norman the property of being a certain kind of artefact (used to write by depositing ink on paper) possessed by God. Since that proposition is transparently false, you realize that Mary is not asserting it, and you look for an alternative inter-

pretation of her remark. Depending on what else is taken for granted in the conversation, you may take her to have asserted (i) that God really is using Norman to communicate his thoughts and desires, (ii) that (God aside) Norman really does have the truth on the matters about which he is speaking, or (iii) that Norman is a windbag who takes himself to be an authority, even though he really isn't. The salient point is that the need to reinterpret is transparent. This is doesn't seem to be so with the utterances of (3a), (5a), and (5b) previously considered. On hearing these remarks like these in conversation, we don't, standardly, take ourselves to be invited to reinterpret them, and when making these remarks ourselves, we don't, normally, take ourselves to be relying on hearers' reinterpretations. Perhaps there is some innocent explanation of this linguistic phenomenology that preserves the explanation given in the previous section. But perhaps not. Perhaps the phenomenology is a hint that something more serious is wrong.

That this is so is suggested by the following example. The context is a math competition in which a large group of students, located in different rooms, are given five math problems, on which they will be evaluated. Of these problems, the last is the most difficult, and any student solving it is guaranteed a place in the finals — though one can also reach the finals by solving all the other four. The teacher in room 1 has corrected the results from her room, and has determined that one, and only one, of her students solved problem 5. In this setting, she assertively utters (7a), and (7b).

(7a) I am passing back your papers. The good news is:

(7b) The student who solved problem 5 will compete in the finals with other high-scoring students in the competition

It is obvious from the context that what she has really asserted, in uttering (7b), is something along the lines of (7c).

(7c) The student *in this group* that solved problem 5 will compete in the finals with other high-scoring students in the competition

This is *not* explained by the simple Russellian account we have given. In the context of utterance, the domain of discourse for the teacher's remarks includes all students in the math competition, including those taking the exam in other rooms — as is indicated by her reference to other high-scoring students. Thus, unless there is reason to posit some further contextual supplementation of the description, 'the student who solved problem 5', the quantification it involves will range over a group including all students taking the test. On the Simple Russellian Treatment, such contextual supplementation will come only

after the semantic content of the sentence uttered has been found wanting, and a reinterpretation of the speaker's remarks is undertaken.

But there is nothing in the context to force such a reinterpretation. According to the present account, the Russellian semantic content of (7b) (in the context) entails that one and only one student (in the math competition as a whole) solved problem 5. It is *not* assumed in the context that *no* student taking the exam in any of the other rooms — or *more than one* — solved that problem (or that the teacher could have no knowledge of such a student if there were exactly one). Since there is no such assumption, there will be no conversational implicature defeating the presumption that the semantic content of the sentence uttered is asserted. This creates two problems for the Simple Russellian Treatment of Incomplete Descriptions. First, the modified principle connecting meaning, semantic content, and assertion that it contains wrongly predicts that the teacher *did* assert the overly expansive (and potentially false) proposition semantically expressed by the sentence she uttered. Second, since no reinterpretation is forced, nothing in the theory will explain that what the teacher *really* asserted was a more restricted (true) proposition, along the lines of (7c).

For the Russellian, the moral of the story is that the principle, The Traditional Connection Between Meaning, Semantic Content and Assertion: 2 — appealed to in the Simple Russellian Treatment of Incomplete Descriptions — is incorrect. Fortunately, however, what has failed is not something specific, or intrinsic, to Russellianism. If there are other, independent, reasons to reject the principle, and to adopt an alternative on which there is no general (defeasible) presumption that the semantic content of a sentence is asserted by normal assertive utterances of it, and no need to restrict contextual supplementation to cases of reinterpretation, then a Russellian semantics of sentences containing incomplete definite descriptions might be preserved. Of course, finding these reasons, and formulating such an alternative, may seem like a tall order. Since no account that *completely* divorces semantic content from assertion could possibly be correct, the challenge is to articulate an appropriately intimate connection between the two that does *not* carry with it even a defeasible general presumption that semantic contents of sentences uttered must be asserted by normal utterances of them. It is this to which I now turn.

V. A New Conception of the Connection between Meaning, Semantic Content and Assertion

The origin of the new conception in my own work is located in thoughts about the semantics of names, natural kind terms, and propositional attitude ascriptions. I have come to believe that the apparent intractability of some of the most important and long-standing problems in this area can be

traced to a conception of the connection between semantic content and assertion very much like the one we have just found wanting. For that reason, I have begun to flesh out an alternative conception of the border between semantics and pragmatics in which the relationship between semantic content and assertion is substantially looser, and more indirect, than it has often been taken to be [Soames (2002), (2004) and (forthcoming)]. This is the picture I will apply to the problem of incomplete definite descriptions.[7]

Central to the picture is a conception of meaning, or semantic content, as *least common denominator*. In explaining this here, I will simplify matters by restricting attention, in the first instance, to indexical-free sentences, the semantic contents of which do not vary from context to context. If S is such a sentence, its meaning and semantic content can be identified. This meaning is what is common to what is asserted by utterances of S in all normal contexts in which it is used literally, without conversational implicatures canceling its normal force. Although the meaning, or content, of S is often a complete proposition, and, hence, a proper candidate for being asserted and believed, in certain cases — for example, those containing genitive constructions, like 'John's car' — it may only be a skeleton, or partial specification, of such a proposition. In many contexts, the semantic content of S — whether it is a complete proposition or not — interacts with an expanded conception of pragmatics to generate a *pragmatically enriched proposition* that it is the speaker's primary intention to assert. Other propositions count as asserted only when they are relevant, obvious, necessary and a priori consequences of the speaker's primary assertions, together with salient presuppositions of the conversational background. On this picture, our previous principle, The Traditional Connection Between Meaning and Assertion: 2, is replaced by the following principle.

> *Meaning, Assertion and Pragmatic Enrichment*
> If M is the meaning (or semantic content) of an indexical-free sentence S, then normal, literal uses of S result in assertions of propositions that are proper pragmatic enrichments of M (provided that conversational implicatures do not cancel the normal force of the utterance, or require it to be reinterpreted). When M is a complete proposition, it counts as asserted only if M is an obvious, relevant, necessary and a priori consequence of pragmatically enriched propositions asserted in uttering S, together with salient, shared assumptions in the conversational background.[8]

The key notion is that of a *proper pragmatic enrichment* of a proposition semantically expressed by a sentence. The types of enrichment most relevant to resolving the issues in this paper involve uses of names and descriptions. First, consider the linguistically simple name, 'Carl Hempel', which refers to a now deceased philosopher of science. When we use a name like this in a particular

context, it is often pragmatically enriched. When you ask, "Were any of your neighbours in Princeton philosophers?", and I answer, "Yes, Carl Hempel, was my neighbour", what I assert is that the philosopher, Carl Hempel, was my neighbour. What *I* mean by *this use* of the name is roughly the same as what the phrase, 'the philosopher, Carl Hempel' means. However, this is not what the name itself means. Different speakers who use the name to refer to the same man may, and often will, associate it with widely different descriptive information. Because of this, different uses of ⌜Carl Hempel was F⌝ in different contexts will result in somewhat different assertions, due to different pragmatic enrichments. Since there is little or no substantial descriptive information common to all these enrichments, the meaning of the name (the common assertive content it carries in all relevant contexts) is simply its referent. The same is true of 'Peter Hempel', which is what Mr. Hempel's friends and colleagues used to call him. Because of this, the two names mean the same thing. Hence, (8a) and (8b) have the same linguistic meaning, even though utterances of the two will nearly always assert and convey different information [Soames (2002), chapter 3].

(8a) Peter Hempel was Carl Hempel

(8b) Carl Hempel was Carl Hempel

If this seems counterintuitive, it is, I think, because one is not clear about what one's intuitions are tracking. Properly understood, the claim that S means, or semantically expresses, p is a *theoretical* claim about the *common informational content* contained in what is asserted and conveyed by utterances of S in different contexts**.** When ordinary speakers are asked whether two sentences mean the same thing, they standardly do *not* focus on the question of whether *what is common* to that which is asserted and conveyed in all contexts involving competent speakers by utterances of one of the sentences is the same as *what is common* to that which is asserted and conveyed by utterances of the other sentence. Instead they often focus on what *they* typically would use the sentences to assert and convey in various contexts, or what information *they* typically would gather from assertive utterances of them. In short, they often focus on whether *they* would typically mean the same thing by the two sentences in particular cases, rather than on whether *the two sentences* mean the same thing in the common language of their community. The latter is, I suggest, the sense of meaning relevant to semantic theories of natural language. This is the sense in which (8a) and (8b) have the same meaning; the information *invariantly* contributed by one to what is asserted and conveyed in different normal contexts by uses of it is the same as the information *invariantly* contributed to what is asserted and conveyed by uses of the other. This is compatible with the fact that in virtually all contexts in which the sen-

tences might be assertively uttered, speakers in those contexts would use them to assert and convey *different* information.

How shall we think about semantic content and pragmatic enrichment in cases like this? In general, we may take the semantic content of a sentence S to be a structured complex, the constituents of which are the semantic contents of the grammatically significant constituents of S. Thus, the proposition semantically expressed by (8a) is a complex the constituents of which are the identity relation, the pair consisting of Mr. Hempel and Mr. Hempel, and the past tense operator. Now suppose that I assertively utter (8a) in a context in which what I assert is that my neighbour Peter Hempel was the philosopher Carl Hempel, represented by (A8a).

(A8a) [the x: x was my neighbour & x = m] was [the x: x was a phi-
losopher & x = m]
(where the content of 'm' is the man, Mr. Hempel)

This asserted proposition is a proper pragmatic enrichment of the proposition semantically expressed by (8a). It arises by enriching the semantic content of each name to form a description the content of which includes the semantic content of the name.

In what follows I will look at a complementary class of cases — those in which the semantic content of a description is pragmatically enriched, often by the inclusion of a contextually salient individual. In some of these cases, I will draw attention to an important feature of the new principle — Meaning, Assertion and Pragmatic Enrichment — first explored in "Naming and Asserting" [Soames (2004)] and extended in "The Gap Between Meaning and Assertion" [Soames (forthcoming)]. It is a consequence of this principle that when one assertively utters a sentence S the semantic content of S is often *not* itself asserted by the speaker's utterance — even if that content is itself a complete proposition, and the agent is speaking literally and unmetaphorically. These types of cases will be important to our final, Russellian, account of incomplete definite descriptions, and Donnellan-style referential uses of descriptions.

VI. REFERENTIAL USES OF NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS

In Donnellan's famous example, a speaker assertively uttering (9) uses the description it contains to pick out, and focus attention on, a certain man m, of whom the speaker predicates the property of being a famous philosopher.

(9) The man in the corner drinking champagne is a famous philosopher

Although the (Russellian) semantic content of the sentence uttered is given by (S9), the speaker asserts something else — namely, the singular proposition expressed by (A9a).

> (S9) [the x: x is a man & x is in the corner & x is drinking champagne]
>   x is a famous philosopher
> (A9a) m is a famous philosopher (where the semantic content of 'm' is
>   the man m himself)

With the new conception of the relationship between semantic content and assertion in place, this is no threat to the Russellian analysis of definite descriptions. In this context, the fact that it is evident to all that m is the intended denotation of the description results in the pragmatic enrichment of the speaker's utterance represented by (PE9).

> (PE9) [the x: x is a man & x is in the corner & x is drinking champagne
>   & x = m] x is a famous philosopher (where the content of 'm' is
>   as before)

This is the primary proposition asserted by the speaker. Since the propositions expressed by (A9a) and (A9b) are obvious necessary and a priori consequences of it, they, too, count as asserted.

> (A9b) m is a man & m is in the corner & m is drinking champagne
>   (with 'm' as before)

What about (S9), the proposition semantically expressed by the sentence uttered? Although it is *not* a necessary consequence of the enriched proposition (PE9), it *is* an obvious necessary and a priori consequence of (PE9), plus the proposition expressed by (BP9).

> (BP9) [the x: x is a man & x is in the corner & x is drinking cham-
>   pagne] x = m

Since in most Donnellan-type cases this proposition will be a background presupposition of the conversation, the semantic content of the sentence uttered will itself usually count as having been asserted by the speaker's utterance.

In these cases, the speaker's referential use of the description in assertively uttering (9) results in the assertion of the propositions represented by (PE9), (A9a), (A9b) and (S9). In situations in which m is the man in the corner drinking champagne, all of these will be true, provided that m is also a famous philosopher. When there are *two* men in the corner drinking champagne, but it is, nevertheless, contextually obvious that the speaker is talking

only about m (because the other men in the corner are already well known and m is the only new guy), the propositions — (PE9), (A9a), and (A9b) — arising from pragmatic enrichment will all be true, but the semantic content (S9) will not be. However, this need not count as a black mark against the speaker, since in cases like this (BP9) will standardly *not* be a background presupposition, and so (S9) will *not* count as asserted.[9]

The speaker is open to the charge of error in cases of misdescription — in which m is not a man in the corner drinking champagne. In these cases (PE9) and (A9b), and sometimes (S9), will be false. However, these culpable errors are mitigated by the fact that the asserted proposition (A9a) remains true. Since in many cases this proposition will be more important to the conversation than whether m is in fact drinking champagne, or really in the corner, the fact that the speaker has, strictly speaking, asserted one or more falsehoods, will matter less than his having asserted an important truth. These seem to be the right results.

A further virtue of the account is the way it generalizes to Kripke's case of referential misdescription involving proper names. In Kripke's example two people see Smith in the distance and mistake him for Jones. The speaker says "Look, Jones is raking leaves," thereby saying something true about Smith, and also something false about Jones. These results fall out of the present approach. The speaker's utterance of (10), in a conversation in which the proposition represented by (BP10) is a background presupposition, results in the assertion of several pragmatically enriched propositions, including (PE10).

(10) Jones is raking leaves

(BP10) The man, s, seen in the distance = Jones (where the semantic content of 's' is the man Smith, seen in the distance)

(PE10) [the x: x = Jones & x = s] x is raking leaves
(where 's' is as before)

Since both (S10) and (PE10a) are obvious necessary and a priori consequences of these propositions, both the semantic content of the sentence uttered, and a singular proposition resulting from pragmatic enrichment, are asserted.

(S10) j is raking leaves
(where the semantic content of 'j' is the man Jones)

(PE10a) s is raking leaves
(where the semantic content of 's' is the man Smith)

In Kripke's example, one of these propositions is true, and the other false, giving us the correct result that the speaker has said something true, and also something false. Thus, the new conception of the relationship between semantics and pragmatics allows us to account for referential uses of both names and definite descriptions, without departing from Russell's theory of descriptions.

VII. INCOMPLETE DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS AND OTHER QUANTIFIERS

Next, consider the incomplete description in (4d), 'The murderer must be insane' — which can be used either attributively, or referentially. Imagine an attributive use made after coming across the body of a victim v. Whereas the semantic content of (4d) has the truth conditions of (S4d), the speaker's utterance of it results in the assertion of the pragmatically enriched proposition represented by (PE4d$_A$).

(S4d) [the x: x is a murderer] x must be insane

(PE4d$_A$) [the x: x is a murderer of v] x must be insane
        (where the content of 'v' is the victim)

Since the semantic content represented by (S4d) is *not* a necessary, or an a priori, consequence of the pragmatically enriched proposition asserted (together with the presuppositions of the conversation), it does not count as asserted. Hence, if the murderer of v really is insane, then the speaker counts as asserting something true, and nothing false — exactly as it should be.

Next consider a referential use of the description in which (4d) is assertively uttered in a context in which a certain man m has correctly been identified as the murderer of v, and the speaker intends to say of m that he must be insane. As before, the semantic content of (4d) is (S4d). However, the pragmatically enriched proposition asserted is either (PE4d$_{R1}$) or (PE4d$_{R2}$), depending on whether the victim also has been identified.

(PE4d$_{R1}$) [the x: x is a murderer & x = m] x must be insane
        (where the content of 'm' is the man identified as the murderer)

(PE4d$_{R2}$) [the x: x is a murderer of v & x = m] x must be insane
        (where 'm' is as before, and the content of 'v' is the victim)

Since the semantic content of the sentence uttered is *not* a consequence of these assertions (plus the presuppositions of the conversation), it does not count as asserted — just as before. By contrast, the simple singular proposition represented by (PE4d$_{R+}$) *does* count as asserted both cases, since in each

case it is an obvious necessary and a priori consequence of the primary, pragmatically enriched, proposition asserted.

(PE4d$_{R+}$) m must be insane

Thus, when the murderer m really is insane, the speaker is again correctly characterized as asserting truths, while saying nothing false.

The same points are illustrated by a case in which (4c) is used to say something about a particular student s. Here the semantic content has the truth conditions of (S4c).

(S4c) [the x: x is a student] x got into an argument with a student from another school

Since the truth of (S4c) requires (i) that there be exactly one student (in the domain of discourse), and (ii) that that student got into an argument with a (different) student from another school (also in the domain), (S4c) must be false. However, this is of no concern to the speaker. Since (S4c) is *not* a consequence of the pragmatically enriched proposition (PE4c) that is asserted, the false semantic content is not something the speaker asserts.

(PE4c) [the x: x is a student & x = s] x got into an argument with a student from another school (where the content of 's' is the student the speaker is talking about)

However, the propositions (A4c1), (A4c2), and (A4c3) *are* consequences of (PE4c), and so are asserted.

(A4c1) s got into an argument with a student from another school (with 's' as before)

(A4c2) A student got into an argument with a student from another school

(A4c3) Two students got into an argument

In this way, we not only get the correct result that the speaker has used the description 'the student' to say of a contextually salient individual that he or she got into an argument with a student from another school, we also capture the two further assertions that proved problematic to the semantically referential theory.

We also handle the crucial example (7b) — 'The student who solved problem 5 will compete in the finals with other high-scoring students in the

competition', — which undermined the Simple Russellian Treatment of In-
complete Descriptions, formulated earlier. Since the semantic content of this
sentence is *not* a necessary or a priori consequence of the pragmatically en-
riched proposition — that the student *in this group* who solved problem 5
will compete in the finals with other high-scoring students in the competition
— that *is* asserted, the semantic content is *not* asserted by the speaker's utter-
ance. The crucial point is that the new principle — Meaning, Assertion and
Pragmatic Enrichment — includes *no* general presumption that the semantic
content of the sentence uttered is asserted, unless there is a conversational
implicature to the contrary. Hence, the fact that there is no such implicature
in this case is no obstacle to getting the right result.

The account also generalizes to examples like (5a) and (5b) — 'No one
knows that you and I are here' and 'Everyone looks up to Larry' — which
contain other quantifiers. Although the semantic contents of these sentences
are false in the contexts in which they are uttered, these contents are not as-
serted because they are neither necessary nor a priori consequences of the
pragmatically enriched propositions — that no one *but us* knows that you and
I are here, and that everyone *of us* or *of them* look up to Larry — that the sen-
tences are used to assert. Thus, our explanation generalizes, as it should.

VIII: Is this Solution to the Problem of Incomplete Descriptions
Truly Russellian?

This completes my defence of the Russellian analysis of definite descrip-
tions as generalized quantifiers. It is, admittedly, somewhat programmatic, re-
lying, as it does, on a new and not yet fully developed conception of the
relationship between semantic content and assertion. For that reason, any final
verdict on it must await further work on several fronts — including the articula-
tion of precise theories of how pragmatic enrichment takes place, and the for-
mulation of substantive constraints on what counts as a *proper* pragmatic
enrichment of the semantic content of a sentence. Nevertheless, I hope to have
made the general approach plausible, and, in so doing, to have illustrated how
the seminal ideas presented a century ago by Russell in "On Denoting" con-
tinue to guide and inform the contemporary study of language. With this heri-
tage in mind, I close by asking how Russellian my defense of Russell really is.

Central to the defence is my conception of the meaning of a (nonin-
dexical) sentence in a language as *the least common denominator* abstracted
from that which speakers mean and assert by utterances of it in all normal
contexts. When meaning is understood in this way, a gap is created between
what a sentence means and *what it is used to assert* that allows pragmatic
features of contexts of utterance to interact with semantic contents of sen-
tences uttered in systematic ways to determine what is, and what is not, as-

serted. Because incomplete descriptions are subject to routine pragmatic enrichment without affecting their austere Russellian semantics, the problems they have traditionally been thought to pose for Russell can, I think, be solved.

That said, I cannot claim my defence of Russell to be thoroughly Russellian. My conception of the meaning, or semantic content, of a sentence S as the least common denominator of what speakers in different contexts use S to assert *cannot*, I am afraid, be found anywhere in Russell. Worse, it seems to be quite different from his standard way of looking at things. As I read him, the project of giving a theory of the meaning of a sentence in the common language of a linguistic community, along the lines that I have suggested, was *not* one of his primary concerns. When he talked of meaning, he mostly had in mind what an individual means by his or her use of a sentence, or an expression, at a given time. From this perspective, the problems posed by so-called incomplete descriptions are not very serious. Since it is routine for speakers to pragmatically enrich their utterances, what *they* mean by ⌈the F⌉ is typically *not* incomplete, when applied to the contexts in which they utter sentences containing it.

There is, I think, an interesting lesson here. The supposed problem of incomplete definite descriptions is, in fact, not a serious problem for broadly Russellian analyses of definite descriptions. It seems to be a problem only if one is confused about, and runs together, two different candidates for the objects of analysis — roughly, *what speakers mean* by utterances of sentences containing such descriptions, and *what those sentences mean* in the common language. Given either choice, Russell's theory works very well. But, whichever choice one makes, one must carry it through consistently. If one is analysing what speakers mean and assert, one must recognize that the *assertive content* of ⌈the F is G⌉ — though broadly Russellian — differs widely from one context to the next, and often is considerably richer than the *semantic content* (in the context) of the sentence in the common language.[10] Something like this was, I think, Russell's preferred perspective. However, one can also take the perspective of a semantic theory of sentences in the common language. As I have argued, Russell's theory of descriptions works well from this perspective, too. However, if one adopts this perspective, one must *not* assume that when speakers assertively utter S, *they* mean, and assert, the proposition that is the semantic content of S (in the context). If this is right, then the problem for Russell posed by incomplete descriptions is really a pseudo-problem that arises primarily from muddying these two perspectives by indiscriminately mixing them together.

School of Philosophy
University of South California
Mudd Hall of Philosophy
3709 Trousdale Parkway, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0451, USA
E-mail: soames@usc.edu

NOTES

[1] Indexical sentences, like *I am hungry*, semantically express different propositions in different contexts of utterance. Nonindexical sentences, like *2+2=4*, semantically express the same proposition in all contexts. In both cases, the semantic content of S in C is the proposition semantically expressed by S in C. However, when S is nonindexical its semantic content (which remains invariant from context to context) can be identified with its meaning, whereas when S is indexical, its meaning is a function from contexts to semantic contents. Although this distinction should always be kept in mind, in cases in which little hinges on it I will skip over it lightly.

[2] Variants of this approach can be found in Wettstein (1981) and Barwise and Perry (1983). For a critique of Barwise and Perry, see Soames (1986). Nathan Salmon critiques Wettstein in Salmon (1982).

[3] Nathan Salmon makes a version of this point in Salmon (1982).

[4] The seminal article in the development of the distinction between attributive and referential uses of descriptions is Donnellan (1966). For a discussion of this distinction in that, and related articles, see Soames (1994).

[5] The importance of examples like this is stressed by Lewis (1979).

[6] In saying this, I am implicitly rejecting an analysis according to which (i) each *occurrence* of a quantifier phrase in a sentence is taken to contain a hidden domain variable and (ii) contexts are expanded to include new parameters (essentially just a list) providing interpretations for each such variable. On this analysis, each quantifier occurrence is assigned a contextually determined interpretation that allows it to range over a specially designated subset of the entire domain. With this freedom, incomplete definite descriptions can just about always be made complete by combining them with right context, in this sense of 'context'. However, contexts, in this sense, are highly abstract objects artificially designed to always give us the propositions we want. Although for some theoretical purposes this sort of analysis may be perfectly acceptable, it is not, in my opinion, what we want from an analysis of how, in natural language, understanding the meaning of a sentence and knowing the circumstances in which it is uttered allow one to interpret the utterance. Since this is what we are after, the abstract analysis that does away with incomplete definite descriptions by fiat can be put aside. These matters are discussed in more detail in Soames (forthcoming).

[7] Although the conception I will present differs in significant ways from those of others, it bears important similarities to some of ideas in the expanding literature on new kinds of pragmatic enrichment. Notable among these are those going by such names as *impliciture* and *explicature* — which stand somewhere between the traditional semantic notion of *what is said* (by a sentence) and the familiar Gricean notion of *implicature*. A representative sample of this literature includes Bach (1994) and (2001), Bezuidenhout (1997), Carston (2002), Chierchia (2004), Horn (2005), Recanati (1993), Sperber and Wilson (1986) and Taylor (2001).

[8] It is not ruled out that sometimes there is no pragmatic enrichment. For these cases, we let semantic contents count as proper pragmatic enrichments of themselves.

[9] As will become clear, this idea will be extended to typical uses of sentences containing incomplete descriptions that succeed in saying something true, and nothing false. In such cases, pragmatic enrichment completes the description, allowing the speaker to assert truths. However, when the description is recognized to be incom-

plete, there will be no presupposition corresponding to (BP9), and the (false) semantic content of the sentence uttered standardly won't count as asserted — because it won't be a consequence of the pragmatically enriched propositions asserted, together with the background presuppositions of the conversation.

[10] In characterizing these assertive contents as broadly Russellian, I am here ignoring Russell's problematic, epistemologically driven, views that drastically restrict the sorts of things with which we can be acquainted, and which can enter into propositions we are capable of entertaining. See Soames (2003), volume 1, chapter 5 for discussion. Among the other problems posed by Russell's extreme epistemology is that it would not allow contextual supplementation of the content of incomplete descriptions by ordinary objects — people, places, and things. Since this *is* needed to account for many ordinary uses of descriptions, my defence of Russellianism is a defence of his semantics, divorced from his epistemological doctrines of acquaintance.

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