

The Case for Referential Descriptions

Michael Devitt

1. Introduction

Definite descriptions ('definites') typically have the form, 'the *F*', but may also have forms like 'his *F*' (equivalent to 'the *F* of him'). Indefinite descriptions ('indefinites') have the form, 'a/an *F*'. According to Russell's theory of descriptions (1905), 'the *F* is *G*' is equivalent to 'there is something that is alone in being an *F* and it is *G*'; and 'an *F* is *G*' is equivalent to 'there is something that is an *F* and it is *G*'. So descriptions are to be understood in terms of quantifiers and the nominal '*F*'.

Under the influence particularly of Keith Donnellan (1966, 1968), many now think that definites are 'ambiguous', having not only the 'attributive' meaning captured by Russell¹ but also a 'referential' meaning like that of a name or demonstrative. Under the influence particularly of Charles Chastain (1975),² some now think the same of indefinites.

It is generally agreed that descriptions have a referential use as well as an attributive use. Used attributively, 'the *F*' conveys a thought about whatever is alone in being *F* and 'an *F*', a thought about some *F* or other; they convey 'general' thoughts. Used referentially, each description conveys a thought about a particular *F* that the speaker has in mind, about a certain *F*; each conveys a 'singular' thought.³

Despite agreement that descriptions have these two uses, there is no agreement that they have two meanings. The quantificational attributive meaning described by Russell is uncontroversial, but many have appealed to ideas prominent in the work of Paul

The chapter has benefited greatly from the comments of Emma Borg, Ernie Lepore, Gary Ostertag, Marga Reimer, Gabriel Segal, Rob Stainton, and, particularly, Kent Bach and Stephen Neale (whose current position is closer to RD than to that in his 1990). It has also benefited from discussions in various courses on reference that I have given at the University of Maryland and the Graduate Center, and from presentations at Syracuse University in Nov. 2001 and the Graduate Center in Apr. 2002.

¹ Any differences that there may be between what Donnellan says of 'attributive' descriptions and Russell's theory of descriptions are beside the point of this chapter.

² See also Strawson (1950); G. Wilson (1978).

³ Some philosophers call these thoughts 'de re', others, 'object-dependent'. I think that there are reasons against both usages (Devitt 1996: 144 n.; 1985: s. 3).

Grice (1989) to deny that descriptions also have a referential meaning. They argue that the referential use of descriptions does not affect truth conditions and is not semantically significant; it is merely pragmatic. Saul Kripke (1977) is a famous example of someone who has argued along these lines. Stephen Neale (1990) has presented the most thorough and persuasive case against the referential meaning of definites, and Peter Ludlow and Neale (1991), against that of indefinites.⁴

I think that the case for the thesis that descriptions have referential meanings has been greatly underestimated. I shall defend the thesis that the referential uses of both *definites* and *indefinites* are *semantically significant*: there are referential descriptions not just referential uses of descriptions. Let us call this thesis 'RD'. I shall present six arguments for referential definites and five for referential indefinites. My aim is to develop and distinguish arguments for RD already in the literature, drawing attention to those that have not yet been criticized; to respond to some criticisms; and to propose some novel arguments. I shall presuppose some familiarity with the literature and so my discussion will often be light on examples.

What are referential meanings? For the purposes of this chapter, the important part of the answer is as follows: the core of the referential meaning of a description token is its reference-determining relation to the particular object that the speaker has in mind in using the description.⁵ I will go further into the answer in section 5.

2. Argument I: The Regular Expression of Singular Thoughts

Definites

Consider this well-known example: 'Someone sees a woman with a man. Taking the man to be her husband, and observing his attitude to her, he says, "Her husband is kind to her" . . . Suppose the man is not her husband. Suppose he is her lover, to whom she has been driven precisely by her husband's cruelty' (Kripke 1977: 7). The speaker has a thought that is not a general one about whoever happens to be her unique husband. It is a singular thought about a certain person, the lover, that the speaker has in mind. Donnellan's discussion of such examples clearly shows that the speaker's utterance

⁴ See also King (1988).

⁵ I use 'semantic' and 'meaning' more broadly than some. On my usage, it is a semantic fact, not a pragmatic one, that a certain deictic token of 'he' refers to the person the speaker has in mind and that the containing utterance depends for its (literal) truth on that reference. And it is a semantic fact about the pronoun type 'he' that it has that deictic use and also has an anaphoric use. According to RD, it is similarly a semantic not pragmatic fact that a certain description token refers to the person the speaker has in mind and that the containing utterance depends for its (literal) truth on that reference. And it is a semantic fact about the description type that it has such a use as well as its use as a quantifier. In contrast, Kent Bach (1987/1994) restricts semantics to the study of types, and places reference in pragmatics. For him a token has only such meaning as it inherits from its type and so the reference of our token 'he' is not part of its meaning. Bach's motivation is that semantics concerns only what the competent speaker knows. I have a very different view (Devitt 1996).

conveys this singular thought even though 'her husband' misdescribes the lover. This use of the definite, 'her husband', is referential. So far, Russell could go along with Donnellan. However, Donnellan seems to be suggesting much more:⁶ that in this referential use the lover not the husband is the referent of 'her husband'. So the referential use affects truth conditions: it is semantically significant. In particular,

- (a) The truth of the remark depends on whether the lover is kind to her, despite the fact that the remark misdescribes him.
- (b) Whether or not the husband is kind to her is irrelevant to the truth of the remark.

Russell, in contrast, holds that the truth depends on the husband not the lover.

A great deal of the debate has been over (a) and the issue of misdescription. To defend (a) one has to claim that the nominal '*F*' in 'the *F*' does not play a semantic role in sentences containing the referential 'the *F*' but only a pragmatic role. This is *prima facie* implausible given the semantic role nominals generally play. Later (section 5), I shall offer further reasons for thinking that '*F*' does indeed play a semantic role. Meanwhile, I shall simply assume that it does with the result that (a) is false: for the remark to be true the person in mind, the lover, must be one husband of the woman even if not her unique husband.

In any case, it is (b) not (a) that is essential to RD. I think that (b) is intuitively appealing. Kripke and Neale do not. Clearly we need to go beyond intuitions to settle the matter.

Kripke and Neale rightly point out that the fact that a sentence conveys a singular thought does not alone show that the sentence literally and conventionally⁷ has this singular meaning; it does not show that the referential use is, in this sense, semantically significant. For Grice has drawn our attention to the way sentences can convey meanings that they do not literally have; their 'speaker meaning' can be different from their conventional meaning; we may not 'say what we mean'. So Grice has opened up the possibility that the referential use of a definite is to be explained pragmatically not semantically. Neale has argued persuasively that a pragmatic explanation is the right one by making a comparison with other quantifiers (1990: 87-91).⁸ Thus, consider 'every':

Suppose it is common knowledge that Smith is the only person taking Jones' seminar. One evening, Jones throws a party and Smith is the only person who turns up. A despondent Jones, when asked the next morning whether his party was well attended, says,

⁶ The caution is necessary because Donnellan's discussion is rather equivocal, as Kripke (1977) points out. See also Bertolo (1980).

⁷ Mostly we can identify the literal meaning of an utterance with its conventional meaning but Donald Davidson (1986) has shown with his discussion of Mrs Malaprop's 'nice derangement of epitaphs' that this is not always so. But this is irrelevant to our present concerns.

⁸ Kripke's comparison of the case of the lover, involving the definite 'her husband'; with the case of Smith raking the leaves, involving the name 'Jones' (Kripke 1977: 15-18) is much less persuasive: the two cases are crucially different (Devitt 1981b: 512-16).

(7) Well, everyone taking my seminar turned up

fully intending to inform me that only Smith attended. The possibility of such a scenario would not lead us to complicate the semantics of 'every' with an ambiguity; i.e., it would not lead us to posit semantically distinct quantificational and referential interpretations of 'everyone taking my seminar'. (87-8)

Similarly, the possibility of Donnellan's scenarios should not lead us to complicate the semantics of 'the *F*'. Neale goes on to argue that Grice's pragmatic theory of 'conversational implicature' (1989) explains the mechanism by which, in all these scenarios, the speaker conveys a meaning that his words do not literally have. Thus, the theory explains how Neale, by assuming that Jones is acting in accordance with 'the Cooperative Principle' and its maxims, derives the implicature (speaker meaning), 'Only Smith turned up', from what Jones literally said (conventional meaning).

The point is well taken. Still, I think that there is an effective response to it (Devitt 1997a: 125-8; 1997b: 388; Reimer 1998c). The basis for RD is not simply that we can use a definite referentially, it is that we regularly do so. When a person has a thought with a particular *F* object in mind, there is a regularity of her using 'the *F*' to express that thought. And there need be no special stage setting enabling her to conversationally imply what she has not literally said, nor any sign that her audience needs to use a Gricean derivation to understand what she means. This regularity is strong evidence that there is a convention of using 'the *F*' to express a thought about a particular *F*, that this is a standard use. This convention is semantic, as semantic as the one for an attributive use. In each case, there is a convention of using 'the *F*' to express a thought with a certain sort of meaning/content.

'Every' and other quantifiers are different. There is no convention of using them to convey a thought about a particular object in mind. With special stage setting they certainly can be used for that purpose, as Neale illustrates. But then Grice shows us that with enough stage setting almost any expression can be used to convey almost any thought.

If there is indeed a semantic referential convention for definites, then the referent of 'the *F*' when used referentially must be the object the speaker has in mind. So, (b) is correct: the husband is irrelevant to the truth of 'her husband is kind to her' in the above example.

Critics of RD have not yet replied to this argument. How might they do so? (1) They might deny that definites are regularly used referentially. But the range of examples produced by Donnellan and others make this denial implausible: day in and day out we do seem to use definites to express singular thoughts. (2) A more likely reply accepts the regularity but attempts to explain it in a Gricean way. The claim would be that a Gricean derivation could yield the appropriate conversational implicature in each referential use. Each use can be seen as exemplifying the pragmatic conversational convention of observing the Cooperative Principle and its maxims. So if the regularity of referential uses is to be seen as a convention at all it is to be seen as simply a derived

pragmatic one. There is no need to see it as a semantic convention, no need to see definites as literally having referential meanings.

There is something deeply wrong with (2). We can get an indication of this by going further down its path. (2) rests on the following view: where an utterance has a conventional meaning and we can derive a different speaker meaning (implicature) from this conventional meaning with the help of appropriate assumptions about the context and mind of the speaker, there is no need to suppose that this derived meaning is another conventional meaning. Now someone over-inspired by Grice—'a fundamentalist Gricean'—might go further, arguing that there are no conventional meanings at all: it is pragmatics all the way down. Consider the time before there were languages. Then there were clearly no conventional meanings to feature in derivations of speaker meanings. Yet, presumably, there came a time when people spoke and others derived the speaker meanings of these utterances simply from appropriate assumptions about the context and the mind of the speaker (just as we still often have to in a foreign country). There came to be regularities in the associations of speaker meanings with sounds and, we are inclined to say, over time some of these 'caught on' and became the first conventional meanings of a language (Devitt and Sterelny 1999: 7.6). But our fundamentalist is not inclined to say this at all: 'There is no need to take these first meanings to be conventional because they can all be derived from assumptions about the context and other minds. We must always remember the word of Grice. His "Modified Occam's Razor" tells us "Senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity" (1989: 47). I say unto you that no senses are necessary.'

How will a defender of (2) resist this *reductio* of her position? She is likely to object that although we could in principle recreate the derivations of these first meanings, contemporary speakers cannot as a matter of fact do so. In contrast speakers can as a matter of fact derive referential meanings.⁹ But why is this contrast between fundamentalism and (2) significant? It rests on a contingent and seemingly irrelevant matter of ignorance. Suppose that there was a massive breakthrough in the study of the origins of English so that we could now all recreate the original derivations. That would surely not eliminate conventional meanings!

A consideration of metaphors drives the point home. A metaphor is a Gricean paradigm: a derivation from the conventional meaning yields an implicature that is the metaphorical speaker meaning. Now, in time, a metaphor often 'dies': an expression comes to mean literally what it once meant metaphorically. Yet an argument along the lines of (2) seems to show that this death is impossible: there would be no moment at which we would cease to be able to give a Gricean derivation of the formerly metaphorical meaning and hence no moment at which we would need to conclude that this meaning had become a new convention. The defender of (2) might respond: 'There is indeed no determinate moment at which a metaphor becomes dead, but this

⁹ Bach (1987/1994) treats the referential use of incomplete definites as a case of 'standardized non-literality'. Bach (1995: 683) thinks that in such cases, but not in cases of semantic conventions, speakers have the information to go through a Gricean derivation of the meanings conveyed.

is just another example of vagueness. In the end, people do cease to be able to derive the expression's formerly metaphorical meaning and then the metaphor is dead.' So, once again we have a defense of (2) that rests on the ignorance of contemporary speakers: And this time the defense clearly fails because speakers are often not ignorant. The expression often still has its original meaning as well as its formerly metaphorical meaning and so speakers could still give a Gricean derivation of the latter meaning. Consider Marga Reimer's nice example of the verb 'incense' (1998c: 97–8). It still means 'make fragrant with incense' although it is now more commonly used to mean 'make very angry'. That use was once metaphorical, to be explained by a Gricean derivation, and it still could be, as Reimer demonstrates. So, according to (2), there is no need to see 'incense' as literally meaning 'make very angry'. Similarly for thousands of other dead metaphors: these expressions do not literally mean what dictionaries say they mean.

What has gone wrong? First, (2) is mistaken in suggesting that the ability of speakers to give a Gricean derivation of the meaning conveyed by an expression makes that meaning a matter of pragmatics not semantics. Indeed, if (2) were right about this, we could make semantic meanings pragmatic simply by removing ignorance of their original derivations: we could eliminate semantic meanings by bringing people up on a close study of the *Oxford English Dictionary*; Gricean fundamentalism run amok!¹⁰ We can agree that if speakers not only could but do use a Gricean derivation to grasp the meaning conveyed then the meaning is a pragmatic not semantic matter. Thus it is plausible that Neale grasped 'Only Smith turned up' by a Gricean derivation, and that audiences grasp metaphors likewise. But people do not now grasp what speakers commonly mean by the verb 'incense' in that Gricean way. That is why the metaphor really is dead. And people do not grasp what a speaker means by a referentially used definite in that way either. Rather, they grasp the meaning immediately and directly because that is the meaning it conventionally has. Second, I suspect that the mistake arises out of inattention to what makes a convention semantic. Gricean discussions have much to say about pragmatic conventions but little about what makes other conventions semantic and not pragmatic. This is probably because it is very difficult to say what makes a convention semantic. And I do not claim to be able to say.¹¹ But such grip as we do have on the matter makes it hard to see what basis there could be for denying that the referential use of definites is a semantic convention.

To undermine the view that the referential use of definites is semantic it is not enough to show that the use could be explained pragmatically. We need an argument

¹⁰ And being able to explain why a quantifier phrase can readily be used to refer does not show that when it is so used the referential meaning conveyed is a matter of pragmatics not semantics. Indeed, diachronic linguistics seeks laws of meaning change that explain the development of one meaning from another. The crux of Bach's response to me in point 13 (this volume) is that the distinctive quantificational character of definites helps explain how they can readily be used to refer and plays a role when they are so used. The editors of the volume encouraged us to take account of each other's chapters. However, someone had to have the last word here and the agreement was that I would not respond in my chapter to his point 13 comments. I plan a response elsewhere.

¹¹ My best attempt is Devitt (1997a: 127–8).

to show that it should in fact be explained pragmatically. Neale's comparison of this use with the referential use of other quantifiers seemed to be a persuasive argument to this effect. I claim to have rebutted that argument. Perhaps another argument can be mounted comparing the referential use of definites persuasively to other phenomena that seem to be pragmatic; for example, to 'generalized' conversational implicatures (Grice 1989: 37-8) apparently exemplified by some uses of 'and' and 'some'; or to 'standardized' non-literality illustrated by 'Have you eaten?' and 'I have nothing to wear' (Bach 1987/1994: 79-81).¹² That remains to be seen. So far as I know, no such argument has been offered.¹³ And, in light of dead metaphors and the threat of a fundamentalist reductio, the prospects of an argument do not seem promising. The regular use of definites to express singular thoughts looks like a semantic convention.

Indefinites

Much the same story goes for indefinites. Consider the following example:

Several of us see a strange man in a red baseball cap lurking about the philosophy office. Later we discover that the Encyclopedia is missing. We suspect that man of stealing it. I go home and report our suspicions to my wife: 'A man in a red baseball cap stole the Encyclopedia.' Suppose that our suspicions of the man we saw are wrong but, 'by chance', another man in a red baseball cap, never spotted by any of us, stole the Encyclopedia.

I wish to convey a singular thought about the particular person we saw in the office not a general thought about anyone in a red baseball cap. I do so by using an indefinite referentially. The literature contains many similar examples of indefinites being used to convey singular thoughts. This much is relatively uncontroversial (but see section 5, pp. 293-4). Controversy begins with the further claim that, contrary to Russell, my remark is not true: the fact that some man in a red baseball cap who was not my suspect stole the Encyclopedia is irrelevant to the truth-value of my remark. This claim is analogous to (b) above for definites. I think that the claim is intuitively appealing but Ludlow and Neale (1991) do not. Once again, we need to go beyond intuitions.

The familiar Gricean point prevents any simple inference from the referential use of indefinites to their having a referential meaning: indefinites, like any other expression, can speaker mean what they do not conventionally mean. What supports the inference

¹² Bach claims, plausibly, that these sentences have a standard use that is non-literal and hence not a semantic convention. But the standard use of sentences containing referential definites is explained, as the use of Bach's sentences is not, by the standard use of a contained expression: sentences containing 'the *F*' are standardly used referentially because 'the *F*' has a standard referential use. Bach's examples give no reason to think that this use of 'the *F*' is not a semantic convention. Still, standardized nonliterality, and generalized implicatures, show that the absence of a Gricean derivation is, sadly, not sufficient to make a use semantic.

¹³ At times Neale seems to suggest that referential uses are generalized implicatures (1990: 81, 90) but his argument is the one I have discussed, concerned with the 'particularized' implicatures involved in referential uses of quantifiers.

is that we regularly use indefinites referentially. When a person has a thought with a particular *F* object in mind, there is a regularity of her using, without any special Gricean stage setting, 'an *F*' to express that thought. This is strong evidence that there is a convention of using 'an *F*' to express a thought about a particular *F*; that this is a standard use. This convention is semantic, as semantic as the one for an attributive use.

Do the conventions for the referential uses of definites and indefinites differ and, if so, how? I shall briefly address this question in section 5.

3. Argument II: 'Donnellan English' and 'Chastain English'

Definites

Kripke has an argument along the following lines in defense of Russell's view. Let us stipulate that a group of people speaks a language based on English in which definites are only attributive. Call this language 'Russell English'. Kripke claims that the phenomena generated by speakers of this language would not differ from those generated by speakers of English. So these phenomena do not falsify Russell's view that English simply is Russell English (1977: 16–17). I reject Kripke's claim: the phenomena would differ because there is no convention in Russell English of using definites to express singular thoughts (Devitt 1981*b*: 520). With careful stage setting there would be the occasional use for this purpose, just as there is with any quantifier in English, but there would not be the regular use. When speakers of Russell English wanted to express a singular thought they would typically rely not on definites but on other devices in the language that are conventionally for that purpose. In the next section I shall argue that demonstratives and pronouns are such devices in English. If so they would also be in Russell English. Speakers of Russell English would behave differently from speakers of English because in the vast majority of situations where speakers of English use a definite referentially, speakers of Russell English would use a demonstrative or pronoun. So Russell's view is falsified after all.

We can go further. Let us stipulate that a group of people speaks a language based on English in which there is not only the Russellian attributive convention but also a convention of using descriptions to express singular thoughts. Call this language 'Donnellan English'.¹⁴ The phenomena generated by speakers of this language would not differ from those generated by speakers of English; there would be just the same regularities. So, these phenomena confirm that English simply is Donnellan English; they confirm RD.

¹⁴ According to Richard Larson and Gabriel Segal there are languages that directly display an ambiguity in (their translation of) 'the': 'German, modern Greek, and spoken colloquial Spanish' (1995: 334); think e.g. of 'Der Hans'.

I do not claim that this point about Donnellan-English adds much to the case for referential definites: it is unlikely to seem persuasive to someone who has not already accepted the case. But, similarly, Kripke's claim about Russell English is unlikely to seem persuasive to someone who has not already accepted the case against referential definites.

Indefinites

Inspired by Kripke someone might stipulate another feature of Russell English: in it indefinites (like definites) are only attributive (Ludlow and Neale 1991: 179–80). The argument in defense of Russell's view that English is Russell English would then proceed as before. And so would my response: Russell English would seem different from English. Among speakers of Russell English, with careful stage setting, there would be the occasional use of indefinites to express singular thoughts, just as there is with any quantifier in English, but there would not be the regular use. Russell's view would be falsified.

Again we can go further. Let us stipulate a language, 'Chastain English', in which there is a convention of using indefinites (as well as definites) to express singular thoughts. The phenomena generated by speakers of this language would not differ from those generated by speakers of English; there would be the same regularities. So, these phenomena confirm that English simply is Chastain English; they confirm RD.

4. Argument III: Comparison with Deictic Demonstratives

Definites

It is agreed that there are singular thoughts, thoughts about a particular object in mind. We should then expect there to be conventional ways of expressing them. The most obvious and uncontroversial way is by the simple demonstratives, 'this' and 'that', and the pronouns 'he', 'she', and 'it'. Indeed, this seems to be the sole role of these terms in their deictic (non-anaphoric) use. And it seems to be one role, at least, of the complex demonstratives, 'this *F*' and 'that *F*', in their deictic use. I shall focus on 'that *F*'.

The argument, which builds on argument I, is that the definite, 'the *F*', is like the deictic 'that *F*' in two ways (Devitt 1981*a, b*; Wettstein 1981). First, the expressions have a very similar conventional role. We could usually change one for the other without apparent cost to our goal of communicating a singular thought. When a demonstration (pointing gesture) is called for, 'that *F*' may seem more appropriate, when it is not, 'the *F*'. However, in each case, the other expression would usually do fine. Little if any change in stage setting is required to change from one expression to

the other.¹⁵ Neale himself talks of referential *définites* 'functioning like a name or like a demonstrative' (1990: 85–6). This function of *définites* is as conventional as that of demonstratives. The convention for demonstratives is semantic not pragmatic, if anything is, and the convention for *définites* is too. So *définites* have a referential meaning. Second, in that meaning, *définites* are like demonstratives in depending for their reference partly on whatever mechanism determines which object is in mind. (I shall discuss this mechanism in section 5.)

Although all *définites* have a function like a demonstrative,¹⁶ argument III is most persuasively run using 'incomplete' *définites* (like 'the book') as examples. Incomplete *définites* are the concern of argument V below. But it is important to see that argument III is quite different from argument V. III is a direct argument for the semantic significance of all referentially used *définites*—for RD—by comparing them with demonstratives. It does not rest on the claim that the Russellian theory fails to handle incomplete *définites*. V, in contrast, is primarily an argument that the Russellian theory does fail at this. Hence V is indirectly an argument for RD that can handle incomplete *définites*. V does not rest on any comparison with demonstratives.

V has been much discussed and criticized. III has not. Why not? One reason is that the two arguments are not sharply distinguished in the literature.¹⁷ Another, it seems to me, is a conservative climate of opinion that takes the task to be simply to defend the Russellian status quo from criticisms rather than to examine the independent merits of Donnellan-inspired alternatives.

Indefinites

With one interesting difference, the argument for referential *indefinites* is the same as for *définites*. Aside from that difference, 'an *F*' has a conventional function very like the deictic 'that *F*' (and hence the referential 'the *F*'). The difference dictates a difference in stage setting but, apart from that, a speaker could change from the demonstrative to the *indefinite*, or vice versa, without cost to her goal of communicating a singular thought. The convention for demonstratives is semantic and so the slightly different one for *indefinites* must surely be so too. So *indefinites* have a referential meaning. And in that meaning, *indefinites* like demonstratives depend for their reference partly on whatever mechanism determines which object is in mind.

¹⁵ Bach claims: 'Suppose you want to refer to some thing (or someone). Suppose it is not perceptually present, has not just come up in the conversation, and is not otherwise salient. Suppose that it does not have a name or that you are unaware of its name or think your audience is unaware. Then you cannot use an indexical, a demonstrative (pronoun or phrase), or a proper name to refer to it... Your only recourse is to use a description' (This volume, point 3). Bach offers no examples to support his claim that there are situations where a description ('the *F*') could be used to refer but a complex demonstrative ('that *F*') could not. I want to insist that if there are such situations, they are relatively rare.

¹⁶ Pace Bach (1987/1994), who thinks that 'no one would suggest' this of complete *définites*.

¹⁷ The focus of Wettstein (1981) is much more on V than III. The focus of Devitt (1981*a, b*) is much more on III than V.

The difference in the conventions for demonstratives and indefinites lies in the intentions of the speaker. I shall discuss the difference at the end of the next section.

5. Explaining Referential Meanings

Perhaps those who reject RD are partly influenced by doubts about whether the referential meanings of descriptions could be explained. So let us briefly consider that matter. The argument of the last section suggests that the explanation of these meanings will be much the same as that of the meanings of complex demonstratives. For both explanations we must look to the singular thoughts that demonstratives and referential descriptions express.

In virtue of what is a thought a singular thought about a certain object in mind? There are differences of opinion about the answer. Thus, I argued that the thought is simply one that is grounded in the object by a certain perceptual causal process (Devitt 1974: 191–2).¹⁸ Gareth Evans called this austere view 'the Photograph Model' and rejected it on the ground that a singular thought about an object requires more than this sort of perceptual link: the thinker must also 'have the capacity to distinguish the object... from all other things' (Evans 1982: 89). Martin Davies (1981: 97) has a similar view tentatively endorsed by Neale (1990: 18). I have argued against Evans's extra requirement (Devitt 1985). However, for present purposes, we need not take a stand on these theoretical differences. It is sufficient to go along with the consensus that a singular thought is about a certain object in mind in virtue of a link to that object that is, at least partly, some sort of perceptual causal link.

This link between a singular thought and an object provides the core of the meaning of any token complex demonstrative or referential description produced by the thought. For the link is central in explaining the fact that the token designates that object.¹⁹

This claim captures the appealing idea that a demonstrative designates the object that the speaker intends to refer to (Kaplan 1989*b*: 582–4). But it goes beyond that idea: it explains in virtue of what that particular object is the intended one.

The claim is at odds with two other ideas about demonstratives. The first is also appealing: that a demonstrative token designates the object demonstrated (Kaplan 1989*a*: 489–91).²⁰ This idea has three problems. (i) A demonstration is often so vague that it alone would not distinguish one object from many others in the environment. (ii) If an object is sufficiently salient in an environment, a demonstrative that refers to it may well not be accompanied by a demonstration. (iii) Reference is often to an object

¹⁸ The explanation is developed in Devitt (1981*a*: 37–40; 1981*b*: 515–16). It is far from complete because of the 'qua-problem': Devitt and Sterelny (1999: ss. 4.5, 5.3; 7.7).

¹⁹ A claim along these lines about demonstratives is to be found in Husserl (1900/01: I, s. 26; vi, ss. 1–5).

²⁰ Stanley and Szabó find this 'uncontroversial' (2000*a*: 220–1).

that is not around to be demonstrated; for example, 'That drunk at the party was boring'. In my view, demonstrations should be treated as referring devices, distinct from demonstratives and requiring their own 'semantics'.

The claim is also at odds with an idea that strikes me as unappealing: that, in each use, 'that *F*' is equivalent to some attributive definite, for example, to 'the *F* that I am demonstrating'. A theory of this sort is a 'description theory' of complex demonstratives. In effect, it treats 'that book' in one of the ways that a Russellian might treat the incomplete definite 'the book'. So the criticisms that I will offer of these ways in section 7 will apply equally to description theories of complex demonstratives. But these theories have a major problem of their own. They accept the similarity that I have just urged between these demonstratives and referentially used descriptions but they respond in the opposite way. I take these descriptions to be like the demonstratives in that they are conventionally used to express singular thoughts about a particular object in mind. These description theories take the demonstratives to be like the descriptions in being conventionally used to express a general thought about whatever fits a description. So, 'that *F*' is not used to express a singular thought about the particular object in mind. What, then, are we to say about the simple demonstrative 'that'? Is it like the complex 'that *F*' in this respect, or is it used to express such singular thoughts? Either way is bad news for the theory (Borg 2000: 235–6). There must surely be some conventional way of expressing these singular thoughts. Simple demonstratives are the most likely candidates.²¹ So it is not plausible to treat them, as the theory treats 'that *F*', as not expressing these thoughts. Yet if 'that' is used to express these thoughts, the theory makes it implausibly different from 'that *F*'.

I talked of 'the core' of a token's meaning being provided by its link to the object in mind in order to allow for there being more than this to its meaning. In discussing misdescriptions (s. 2), I assumed that '*F*' also contributes to the meaning of 'the *F*', pointing out the prima-facie implausibility of claiming otherwise. The same implausibility attaches to analogous claims about referential indefinites and complex demonstratives.²² Further reasons have been provided for thinking that '*F*' does indeed contribute to the meaning of 'that *F*'.²³ These reasons can be carried straight over to referential descriptions. Thus, the following argument forms, which are obviously valid when the description is attributive, seem so also when it is referential: 'All *F*s are *G*; so, if the/an *F* exists it is *G*'; 'The/an *F* is *G*; so, some *F* is *G*'; 'The/an *F* is *G*; so, something is *F* and *G*'. And statements of the following form seem contradictory: 'The/an *F* is not *F*'. It is hard to see how this could be so if '*F*' were not making a semantic contribution to the referential 'the/an *F*'.

²¹ Note that not all terms can be covered by description theories of reference. A description theory of a term passes the referential buck from that term to descriptions the speaker associates with it, simply postponing the ultimate explanation of reference. Some terms will have to be explained nondescriptively if language is to be 'hooked onto the world' (Devitt and Sterelny 1999: 60). Simple demonstratives are likely hooks.

²² Still, the claim about definites and demonstratives has its supporters, e.g. Larson and Segal (1995: 213, 340–1).

²³ See e.g. Borg (2000) and Lepore and Ludwig (2000).

How might 'F' make this semantic contribution? I have always favored the view that 'F' plays a role in determining the reference of the referential 'the/an F', as also in determining the reference of the demonstrative 'that F'.²⁴ So, on my view of singular thoughts (on which, I emphasize, the arguments of this chapter do not depend), 'the/an/that:F' would designate an object that 'F' applies to and that 'the/an/that F' is causally grounded in by perception.²⁵ Other possibilities suggested for 'that F' take 'F' to contribute independently of 'that'. 'That F is G' is treated as equivalent either to 'That is F and G' or, as Ernest Lepore and Kirk Ludwig (2000) urge, to '[The x : x = that and x is an F](x is G)'.²⁶ The same possibilities are available for the description 'the/an F' in so far as we can treat it as implicitly containing something like the simple demonstrative 'that'.²⁷ I shall remain neutral between these possibilities.²⁸

My neutrality is more extensive than this. It is common to force discussions about complex demonstratives and referentially used descriptions into a semantic framework, particularly the framework of 'direct reference' arising out of David Kaplan's pioneering work on indexicals and simple demonstratives (1989*a*, *b*). Thus, it is assumed that if something is a referential description then its contribution to 'the proposition expressed' must be simply the object designated. I appreciate the motivation for this assumption but I am not making it. It is generally appropriate that one's assessment of the evidence for a view should be theory-laden. However, it seems to me that there is not much theory in semantics that is well-enough established to bear this burden. In particular, I doubt that direct reference can bear it (Devitt 1996: ch. 4). So I aim to produce a case for RD that is fairly neutral about semantic frameworks. I think

²⁴ Although I was a bit tentative about this in early writings (Devitt 1981*a*: 54; 1981*b*: 519). Borg (2000) favors this view for demonstratives.

²⁵ In Donnellan's cases of misdescription, we feel a tension arising from the speaker having done something right and something wrong. Neale claims: 'The referentialist can say nothing useful here' (1990: 91; see also Soames-1994: 154). On the contrary, the referentialist can explain the tension as I did: 'the F' is causally grounded in an object that 'F' does not apply to.

²⁶ There has been some discussion of an alleged difficulty for the former possibility (Richard 1993; Braun 1994; Borg 2000): sentences of the form 'Nec(that F exists \rightarrow it is F)', which should be false, would turn out true. If this difficulty were real, it would carry over to Lepore and Ludwig's proposal. They argue persuasively that attention to scope ambiguities removes the difficulty (2000: 221-5). They also offer two reasons for preferring their proposal to my favored view that 'F' determines reference. The first, which they think decisive (213 n.), is that the view cannot account for the truth of sentences of the form 'Nec(that F is G \rightarrow some F is G)'. But this is not so. If 'F' must apply to what 'that F' designates then of course such a sentence will be true. Where a description plays a role in determining a word's reference it will always yield necessities; consider e.g. 'Nec(Jack the Ripper is G \rightarrow some murderer is G); 'Nec(some bachelor is G \rightarrow some unmarried man is G)'. Second, they suggest that the view cannot accommodate the fact that 'one can quantify into the nominal, and terms in the sentence can be anaphoric on quantifier expressions in the nominal' (213). They do not explain why the view cannot.

²⁷ The soon-to-be-discussed 'interesting difference' between 'an F' and 'that F' poses a problem for these two possibilities for indefinites.

²⁸ This neutrality requires a modification of the above criticism of description theories of complex demonstratives since Lepore and Ludwig's (2000) view is, in effect, such a theory. However, their view avoids the criticism because it allows that part of what 'That F is G' expresses is the singular thought that that (the object in mind) is G.

that this case is sufficiently strong that any acceptable semantic framework should have to accommodate RD.

Finally, although referential definites are very like complex demonstratives, referential indefinites differ from them in an interesting way. I shall discuss the difference briefly.

In a deictic use of 'that *F*', as indeed of 'that', the speaker *S* wishes to convey *S*'s intention that the audience *A* should identify the object *S* has in mind with an object that *A* has in mind independently of *S*. *A*'s having the object in mind 'independently' rules out *A*'s having it in mind simply as a result of 'borrowing' the capacity to do so from *S* via the utterance. *A* must have some other link to the object. This independent link might have been established before the utterance or it might be immediately established by the object's perceptual salience in the context of the utterance; for example, 'that *F*' said while looking at, perhaps gesturing toward, a particular *F*. In the latter sort of case, the utterance prompts a link between *A* and the object that is additional to any that underlie *S*'s utterance.

The conventions for a referential definite are very similar to those for the demonstrative but those for an indefinite differ interestingly. In using 'an *F*' referentially, *S* (usually) does not convey any intention that *A* should identify the object *S* has in mind with an object that *A* can identify independently.²⁹ (a) *S* may lack this intention because *S* thinks that *A* does not already have the object in mind and that the context of the utterance will not immediately prompt *A* to have it in mind. Or, (b), whatever *S* thinks along these lines, *S* may not intend *A* to make the appropriate identification. Perhaps *S* is concerned that *A* not make the identification.

Some philosophers have a different view of indefinites, treating a use that accords with what I have just described as the convention for referential indefinites *not* as referential at all but rather as 'specific' (Bach this volume, point 6; see also Ludlow and Neale 1991: 180–3). They urge this treatment because even though *S* communicates that he has a certain individual in mind, *S* does not intend *A* to identify it and so does not convey a singular proposition. I think this misdescribes the missing intention. *S* lacks the intention that *A* should identify the object that *S* has in mind with one that *A* has in mind *independently*. But *A* can *borrow the reference* of the indefinite from that very use of the indefinite thus identifying the object, and *S* intends that *A* do so. As a result, *S* does intend to convey a singular proposition. Similarly, someone with no independent capacities to refer to *Catiline* or *elms* can borrow these capacities from a speaker's use of '*Catiline*' and '*elm*'. Shocking as this idea may once have seemed, I think (Devitt 2001) that it has been established by such works as Kripke (1980) and Putnam (1975). And the borrowing in all these cases has a similar causal explanation (cf. Ludlow and Neale 1991: 182 n.). If this point is granted, it is simply a verbal issue

²⁹ I am here describing what I take to be the *conventional* meaning of a referential indefinite. Indefinites may of course sometimes be used, like a referential definite, with the intention that *A* *should* independently identify the object in mind; Ludlow and Neale provide some examples (1991: 176–80). I think that Bach is probably right in claiming that such uses are 'relatively rare' (this volume, point 6).

whether we call these uses of indefinites 'referential', as I do, because they are like referential uses of definites in conveying a singular proposition, or call them 'specific' (or whatever), as Ludlow, Neale, and Bach do, because they are unlike referential uses of definites (although not, note, referential uses of proper names) in not having to be accompanied by an intention that *A* should independently identify the object in mind. What matters, I claim, is that these uses of indefinites exemplify a semantic convention other than the Russellian convention.

Consider some examples of the referential use of indefinites. My earlier remark to my wife, 'A man in a red baseball cap stole the Encyclopedia', is an example of (a). I use the indefinite because I suppose that my wife has no way independent of my remark to identify the suspect I have in mind. But suppose I knew that she had been among those who had observed the man in the red baseball cap lurking in the office. Then I would very likely have said 'The man in the red baseball cap . . .', or 'That man in the red baseball cap. . .'³⁰

The difference between using an indefinite and a definite can be subtle. Consider this adaptation of an example of Ludlow and Neale (1991: 177): *S* says, 'A man is uprooting your turnips', while looking at a man out the window. Compare this with *S*'s saying 'The man is uprooting your turnips' in the same circumstances. Suppose that *A* was not in a position to see the man out the window. Then the statement with the indefinite but not the definite would be appropriate because *A* cannot make an immediate independent identification of the man. Suppose next that *A* were beside *S* at the window. Then the statement with the definite is certainly appropriate. The interesting point to note is that the one with the indefinite might be too, exemplifying (b). *S* might not care whether *A* makes the independent identification. Or he might care but not be insisting on it in this utterance.

Here is another example of (b). Both *S* and *A* found a certain person the life and soul of a party. Next day, *S* wishes to pass on to *A* some particularly juicy gossip that she obtained from that person. But she does not want to reveal her source. Saying 'The man at the party told me' would reveal the source, but saying 'A man at the party told me' would not.

For a variety of reasons, people who have a singular thought about a certain *F* often want to express it without conveying an intention that *A* identify the object in mind with an object *A* has independently in mind; they want *A* to 'open a singular file', not add to one independently opened. It would be surprising indeed if there were no conventional way for them to do this. Using 'an *F*' is a brief conventional way to do it. Using 'a certain *F*' or 'a particular *F*' seems to be a more lengthy way.³¹

It is worth noting that 'this *F*' seems to be another way (in colloquial English at least). Thus, instead of using an indefinite, I might have said to my wife, 'This man in the red baseball cap stole the Encyclopedia', and *S* might have said to *A*, 'This man is

³⁰ So a referential definite can initiate an anaphoric chain just as an indefinite can; cf. Chastain (1975: 206).

³¹ This account of the difference between referential definites and indefinites differs from those of Chastain (1975: 206-9) and G. Wilson (1978: 67-8).

uprooting your turnips'. So, 'this *F*' not only has a referential use like 'that *F*', which conveys the identifying intention, but one like 'an *F*', which does not.³²

My aim in this section has clearly not been to give a full explanation of the meaning of a referential 'the/an *F*'. Rather, the aim has been to identify three aspects that a full explanation must take into account: first, and most important, the description's perceptual causal link to the object in mind; second, the contribution of '*F*'; and, third; the differing conventions for 'the *F*' and 'an *F*' just described. I trust that this is enough to show that the meanings of referential descriptions are no more inexplicable and mysterious than meanings in general.

Perhaps I should add that my aim has not been to specify or analyze the meanings where this is taken to involve finding other ways of expressing the meanings. Since the meaning of a referential description is largely constituted by its causal links to the world the only way to express its meaning may well be to use that very description (or another that is only trivially different like 'a certain *F*' or 'the particular *F*'); similarly the only way to express the meaning of a proper name may be to use it. The task should be to explain the meaning not express it (Devitt 1996: 162–3).

6. Argument IV: 'Weak Rigidity'

Definites

Consider Donnellan's classic example of Jones on trial for the murder of Smith. Observing Jones's strange behavior someone remarks, 'The murderer is insane'. This is a referential use of a definite. Nathan Salmon claims that, according to RD, this sentence,

as used on this occasion, is true with respect to any possible world in which Jones is insane, even if Smith is alive and well, Jones is no murderer at all, and in fact, no murders are committed by anyone anywhere. It seems quite clear, however, that the sentence 'The murderer is insane' is not true with respect to such a world... (1982: 42; see also Neale 1990: 92–3)

In brief, Salmon is arguing

- (1) If definites had a referential meaning, then definites used referentially would be rigid.
- (2) Definites used referentially are not rigid.
- (3) So, definites do not have a referential meaning.

Howard Wettstein, a defender of RD (for definites), accepts (1) (1981: 249–50). So does Michael Nelson (1999: 578), a critic of both Wettstein and Salmon. I think that this is a mistake. I share Salmon's intuitions about (2) and the truth-values of 'The

³² Larson and Segal note that 'this *F*' has a similar meaning to 'an *F*' but take this meaning to be like that of an 'existentially quantified expression' (1995: 336). I take it to be a referential meaning.

'murderer is insane' in the possible worlds he describes. However, far from being at odds with RD, these intuitions are just what RD predicts, given the contribution of 'murderer' to the meaning of 'the murderer'. At least, they are just what RD predicts if we do not force referential descriptions into the framework of direct reference.

In the last section, I noted three ways in which 'murderer' might contribute. First, it might play a role in determining the reference of 'the murderer'. Then, in the actual world, 'the murderer' will designate Jones, the person the speaker has in mind, only if he is a murderer. And just the same should surely go for any other possible world. The referential 'the murderer' can no more refer in any possible world to a person who is not a murderer than can the attributive 'the worst murderer'. So 'The murderer is insane' is indeed not true in the worlds Salmon describes. RD does not require that a referential definite be rigid, as (1) claims, but rather 'weakly rigid' according to the following definition: *e* is weakly rigid iff it designates the same object in every possible world in which that object exists *and any descriptive element of e applies to that object*. The other two ways that 'murderer' might contribute take 'the murderer' to contain an implicit demonstrative that operates independently of 'murderer': 'The murderer is insane' is equivalent either to 'That is a murderer and insane' or to Lepore and Ludwig's '[the *x*: *x* = that and *x* is a murderer] (*x* is insane)'. Once again 'The murderer is insane' is not true in the worlds described and 'the murderer' is not rigid. But it is 'weakly rigid' according to the following definition: *e* is weakly rigid iff it contains, implicitly or explicitly, an element that designates the same object in every possible world in which that object exists *and any sentence containing e is true only if any descriptive element of e applies to that object in that world*.

Earlier I have likened the referential definite 'the *F*' to the complex demonstrative 'that *F*'. So what I have just argued for definites should apply also to demonstratives. And so it does: 'that *F*' is not rigid but only weakly rigid. Had the speaker in Donnellan's example said 'That murderer is insane', her remark would have been no more true in the possible worlds Salmon describes than was 'The murderer is insane'.³³

Once one has accepted that the meanings of 'that *F*' and the referential 'the *F*' involve not only the link to the object in mind but also the nominal '*F*', there is no motivation for resisting the intuition (partly endorsed by Salmon) that 'that *F*' and the referentially used 'the *F*' are not rigid.³⁴

This response to Salmon's criticism of RD provides the basis of an argument for RD. The argument draws its inspiration from Kripke's 'lost rigidity' argument against the description theory of proper names (1980):

³³ In 'Demonstratives' (1989a), written in 1977, Kaplan argued for the rigidity of simple demonstratives but, so far as I can see, not for that of complex demonstratives. Still, it is natural to suppose that he believed in that rigidity. By the time of 'Afterthoughts' his opinion has become much more nuanced (1989b: 580-4).

³⁴ This discussion has the following consequences (taking the definites to be referential). (i) If 'The murderer is Jones' is true it is not necessarily true in the sense of being true in every possible world where Jones exists. It is true only in worlds where Jones is a murderer; cf. Salmon (1982: 43). (ii) Although 'The murderer did not kill anyone' might convey a truth it is not literally true in any possible world. But this is quite compatible with the truth of 'The murderer might not have killed anyone' (with the scope of the definite wide).

Definites used referentially are weakly rigid.
Attributive definites are not weakly rigid.
So, definites used referentially are not attributive.

Indefinites

An analogous argument can be made for indefinites:

Indefinites used referentially are weakly rigid.
Attributive indefinites are not weakly rigid.
So, indefinites used referentially are not attributive.

Consider my remark: 'A man in a red baseball cap stole the Encyclopedia'. This remark is true in any possible world in which the person we actually sighted lurking about the office wears a red baseball cap and steals the Encyclopedia. It is not true in a world where that person is not in a red baseball cap. 'A man in a red baseball cap' is weakly rigid whichever definition is appropriate. And so is 'a man' in *S*'s. 'A man is uprooting your turnips'.

Unfortunately, these 'lost rigidity' arguments do little on their own to support RD. For the critic of RD can resist their first premises by appealing once again to Grice: although referentially used descriptions convey weakly rigid thoughts—or express weakly rigid propositions—this is not because they have referential meanings. After all, the critic points out, we might all accept that Jones's use of 'everyone taking my seminar' in Neale's example 'Well, everyone taking my seminar turned up' conveys a weakly rigid thought, but nobody supposes that this expression has a referential meaning. We need arguments I–III to establish that descriptions have referential meanings. Then the lost rigidity arguments bring out a respect in which those meanings differ from attributive meanings.

7. Argument V: Incomplete Descriptions

Definites

Consider Wettstein's example (1981: 246), 'The table is covered with books', said with a particular table in mind. Its definite is 'incomplete'³⁵ in that it does not uniquely describe any object and nobody would suppose that it did. Yet remarks of this sort often seem to be literally true. RD can readily explain this: 'the table' is referential and so it does not depend for its reference on a unique description but rather on a percep-

³⁵ Donnellan (1968) called these definites, 'indefinite definite descriptions'. Wettstein (1981) followed this infelicitous usage. Kripke (1977) called them 'improper'. Devitt (1981*a, b*) called them 'imperfect'. The received term for them now is 'incomplete'.

tual causal link. Clearly, if the Russellian view cannot explain how such incomplete definites yield truths, we have a powerful argument against that view and hence for referential definites.³⁶

The obvious Russellian explanation is that an incomplete definite is elliptical for a longer description that the speaker could supply. Neale calls this explanation 'the explicit approach'. Although this approach may handle some examples, we shall soon see that it is generally hopeless. A much more promising Russellian explanation is what Neale calls 'the implicit approach': 'the context of utterance delimits the domain of quantification' of the definite (1990: 95). But this explanation also has problems.

It is important to note that any argument against these Russellian approaches faces a significant constraint. The constraint arises from the uncontroversial fact that some incomplete definites are attributive and Russellian: they are used without any particular object in mind.³⁷ As Neale points out (1990: 94-5), we need an account of these incomplete definites whatever we say about the referential uses of descriptions. Indeed, we need an account of incomplete quantifiers in general; consider, for example, the response 'Everyone was sick' to a query about last night's dinner party. The significant constraint is that an argument against a Russellian treatment of referentially used incomplete definites must not be so strong as to count equally against any Russellian treatment of incomplete attributive definites. For some Russellian treatment of these definites has to be right. In brief, there must be no overkill.

I have emphasized the similarity between referentially used definites and complex demonstratives. The similarity is implicitly acknowledged by description theories of complex demonstratives although, of course, these theories have a very different view of that similarity. These theories treat the demonstratives the way Russellian theories treat incomplete definites (s. 5). Indeed, whenever a Russellian theory of incomplete definites is proposed, an analogous theory of complex demonstratives might be proposed; and vice versa. I criticized description theories of complex demonstratives because they cannot be plausibly combined with a plausible theory of simple demonstratives. Aside from that, any description theory of complex demonstratives is as plausible or implausible as the analogous Russellian theory of incomplete indefinites. And any criticisms of Russellian theories, like those below, apply equally to the analogous description theories of complex demonstratives. Given all this, it is interesting that we do not mostly find that wherever a theory of the one sort is proposed the analogous theory of the other sort is also. For example, so far as I know, nobody has proposed a description theory of complex demonstratives that follows Neale's implicit approach to incomplete definites.

In criticizing Russellian theories of referentially used definites we can look for inspiration to problems that are, in my view, devastating for description theories of names and are potentially difficult for description theories of any term (Kripke 1980;

³⁶ Bach (1987/1994: 106, 125) avoids this problem by denying, implausibly, that incomplete definites do literally yield truths.

³⁷ I overlooked this in Devitt (1981*b*).

Donnellan 1972; Putnam 1975). Thus, the 'lost rigidity' argument in the last section was inspired by one such problem. We shall now consider criticisms related to four others: the problems of 'the principled basis', 'unwanted ambiguity', 'ignorance and error', and 'theoretical redundancy'.³⁸ In furthering the cause of RD I aim to criticize not only Russellian theories that have been proposed but ones that might be. I shall start with theories that adopt the explicit approach.

Principled basis

From the beginning, the description theory of names was bothered by the problem of choosing which of the many descriptions speakers associate with a name is the one that expresses its meaning and determines its reference. A similar problem faces the explicit approach to incomplete definites. As Wettstein (1981) argues, a speaker is likely to have many ways to complete the description and there is often no basis for determining the correct way. Neale (1990: 101) attempts to answer this criticism but, as Reimer demonstrates (1992: 352–4), the attempt surely fails. One might respond that, indeed, the speaker does not say anything determinate (W. Blackburn 1988; Schiffer 1995). But this is ad hoc and unconvincing. Gary Ostertag (1999: 126–32) brings out nicely the seriousness of the principled basis problem for the explicit approach.

Unwanted ambiguity

Another initial problem for the description theory of names was that any solution to the principled basis problem would be likely to select different descriptions for different speakers. So, implausibly, one speaker would mean one thing by the name, another speaker would mean another. Once again, a similar problem faces the explicit approach to definites. Any solution a theory could provide to the principled basis problem would be likely to have the implausible consequence that uses of 'the book' by various people in a dialogue, each with the same book in mind, had different meanings because the descriptive completions for the uses would differ.³⁹

Ignorance and error

A more recent and, in my view, much more devastating problem for the description theory of names is that in requiring competent speakers to be able to supply identifying descriptions of the referent the theory puts far too large an epistemic burden on speakers. Here is a recipe for generating examples that pose a similar problem for the explicit approach. Take a referential use of an incomplete 'the *F*' where the object in mind is indeed *F*. So RD captures the intuitive view that the definite refers to that object. Then attribute to the speaker beliefs about the referent that are too inadequate—ignorance—or too wrong—error—to enable her to supply a completion that

³⁸ These problems, and others, for descriptions theories are discussed in Devitt and Sterelny (1999: chs. 3 and 5).

³⁹ This criticism relates to Wettstein's (1981) that even if there were a correct completion of a speaker's incomplete description, a listener would not be in the position to select it.

uniquely describes the referent. George Wilson (1991) has generated a case of ignorance and a case of error. It is not hard to generate others. These count equally against the implicit approach and I shall postpone giving details until discussing that approach.

Theoretical redundancy

Some defenders of description theories of names responded to the ignorance and error problem, and to the new 'causal theory', by claiming that a name is equivalent to an associated description along the lines of 'the cause of this token'. (This view is known as 'causal descriptivism'.) Similarly, most description theories of complex demonstratives take 'that *F*' to be equivalent to an associated description along the following lines: 'the *F* pointed to by a gesture accompanying this token' (cf. Reichenbach 1947); or 'the *FI* am perceiving' (cf. Schiffer 1978); or, allowing for the alleged rigidity of demonstratives, 'the actual *FI* am demonstrating' (cf. Neale 1993). What all these description theories have in common is that they are parasitic on plausible nondescription theories. The description theories allege that the reference of a name or demonstrative is what a description associated by the speaker denotes. If so, then the referent would have to stand in the described relation of causing the token, being pointed at, being perceived, etc. But this relation alone would then be sufficient to explain reference. And, of course, plausible nondescription theories claim that such relations are indeed sufficient to do so. Requiring the speaker to associate a description of the relation does no theoretical work. The description theories' contribution to explaining reference is redundant.

Clearly, there could be similarly parasitic theories of the referentially used incomplete definite, 'the *F*'. They would exemplify the Russellian explicit approach. So far as I know, no such theory has yet been proposed but, given the history of theories of names and demonstratives, it seems likely that one soon will be. It is important to the case for RD to see that such a theory would have the same defect of theoretical redundancy.

When one adds parasitic descriptions to the already large set of possible completions, the principled basis and unwanted ambiguity problems for the explicit approach worsen. The cumulative force of these criticisms overwhelms theories of referentially used incomplete definites that take the explicit approach.⁴⁰ And so it would also description theories of complex demonstratives that took that approach.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Consider also this neat point by Larson and Segal: 'material that is semantically significant but phonetically unpronounced is treated in discourse as if it were nonetheless overt' but there is no sign of such treatment with definites (1995: 331).

⁴¹ John Perry (1977: 485–6) in effect contemplates a nonparasitic explicit theory on behalf of Frege. G. Wilson (1991: 375–6) criticizes such a view. Lepore and Ludwig have some other criticisms of parasitic theories (2000: 207–11). Despite all these criticisms, demonstratives may on occasions be used as abbreviated descriptions. Colin McGinn (1981: 161–2) and Rod Bertolet (1987: 258–9) give nice examples of such uses. Perhaps these uses show that deictic demonstratives can be attributive as well as referential but it seems more likely that the uses are examples of attributive speaker meaning not conventional meaning.

But have I gone in for overkill? Indeed, the principled basis and unwanted ambiguity problems show that the explicit approach is mostly unsuitable for incomplete attributive descriptions and incomplete quantifiers in general. Still, there is no overkill. The moral to draw is that the explicit approach is not only unable to handle referentially used incomplete definites but also most uses of incomplete quantifiers (although it may be able to handle some). So I turn to the implicit approach. I must avoid overkill by presenting an argument that counts against that approach to referentially used incomplete descriptions but not against that approach to incomplete attributive descriptions.

First, I need to be clearer about the implicit approach. On this approach, the domain of the quantifier is restricted by the context. There has been considerable discussion about whether this restriction is on whole sentences, clauses, or particular occurrences of a quantifier. I am convinced by Ostertag's argument (1999: 132–7) that the restriction is on the latter. But this still leaves a question: what determines the restriction? There has been surprisingly little attention to this question but I take it that the only plausible answer is that the domain is restricted by the speaker's intentions:⁴² the speaker associates with the quantifier some description of its domain (perhaps a description containing a demonstrative). How then does the implicit approach differ from the explicit one? It differs in not requiring the speaker to have settled on one particular description: the speaker may associate several different descriptions provided that they yield the same restriction of the domain.⁴³ Thus, in saying 'Everyone was sick', it will not matter if the speaker implicitly restricts 'everyone' by 'I had dinner with last night' and 'in my house last night' provided these descriptions restrict the domain to the same group of people. Should the associated descriptions provide different restrictions of the domain, then there will be some indeterminacy in what is said. But it is plausible to think that there is often some indeterminacy (Ostertag 1999: 141–2):

The implicit approach to referentially used definites seems to do well enough with the principled basis and unwanted ambiguity problems. Thus, in Wettstein's example, the different descriptions that his speaker associates with 'the table', namely 'in room 209 of Campden Hall at t_1 ' and 'at which the author of *The Persistence of Objects* is sitting at t_1 ', can each be seen as implicitly restricting the domain of the quantifier to one and the same table. We do not have to choose between the descriptions. And, in Donnellan's example, the associations 'of Smith' and, say, 'now in Court 5' might well both restrict 'the murderer' to Jones. But the implicit approach does no better than the explicit with the problem of ignorance and error. It is time to give more details of that problem.

Consider ignorance first. Each of the following cases of referential uses can be developed into plausible examples of a speaker not knowing enough about the object

⁴² And see Ostertag (1999: 141).

⁴³ This difference undermines Neale's suggested conversion of the implicit approach into the explicit (2000: 288–9).

in mind to supply the needed restriction. (i) Wilson's case of the aged and forgetful Valjean, who has many old enemies, saying 'My old enemy is back in town' (1991: 373). (ii) Suppose that Wettstein's speaker made his remark about a table in a room with many similar tables. (iii) Suppose that Donnellan's Smith had two murderers and that the other one is also in Court 5.⁴⁴ (iv) Suppose that *S* passes on some juicy gossip by saying 'The man at the party told me...' with a particular man in mind whom she can but dimly remember.

A defender of the implicit approach may be tempted to respond to this problem by going parasitic: for example, the domain of 'the table' is restricted by the associated description 'that I am perceiving'.⁴⁵ But this sort of proposal acknowledges, in effect, that the description has its reference determined in the way that RD claims while adding the theoretically redundant requirement that the speaker associate a description of that way.

Next, consider error. Each of the following cases of referential uses can be developed into plausible examples of a speaker providing the wrong restriction: (i) Wilson's case of a man saying to his wife, 'The girl ought to be punished', having in mind a girl he wrongly believes to be their daughter (1991: 374). (ii) Suppose that Wettstein's speaker has various mistaken beliefs about the location of the table. (iii) Suppose that Jones murdered Robinson not Smith and is in Court 4 not 5. (iv) Suppose *S* wrongly believes that the source of the gossip was a man from Columbus in a black suit (he was from Cleveland in a blue suit).

I have been brief in describing these cases because it is really very easy to develop them into plausible counter-examples to the implicit approach. And yet in each development, despite ignorance and error, the speaker uses an incomplete definite to express a thought about a particular object in mind.

Is the ignorance and error argument a case of overkill? Does it count equally against the implicit approach to incomplete attributive descriptions and other quantifiers? I think not. With attributive descriptions, unlike the referential ones, any ignorance or error by the speaker really does affect the truth of what is said.⁴⁶ Thus suppose someone hears of the ghastly murder of Smith and remarks 'The murderer is insane'. Now suppose that two people in fact murdered Smith. Any plausible restriction on the quantifier will not achieve uniqueness and so the remark will be false on the implicit approach. This seems right. That is a case of ignorance. Here is one of error: Suppose

⁴⁴ Reimer has a nice example of this sort: 'Suppose that John and Mary have recently hired two men to do some remodelling on their home: Joe, a carpenter and Fred, an electrician. Suppose further that, after watching the two men argue all day long, John says to Mary... "the carpenter is not getting along with the electrician"' (1998a: 97). Now suppose that, unbeknownst to John and Mary, Joe is also an electrician and Fred is also a carpenter.

⁴⁵ Ostertag seems close to this (1999: 138).

⁴⁶ Bach thinks not. He has argued vigorously for a pragmatic approach according to which a speaker's use of an incomplete quantifier is accompanied by an implicit domain restriction which affects what she means but not what she literally says. So the utterances of 'The murderer is insane' and 'Everyone was sick' are literally false. Whether or not the pragmatic approach to incomplete quantifiers is better than the semantic is a subtle matter; see Bach (2000b), Stanley and Szabó (2000a, b), and Neale (2000).

that the victim is not Smith but Robinson. Any plausible restriction on the quantifier will involve reference to Smith and so on the implicit approach the remark will be false. Again that seems right.

In sum, the truth condition of an utterance involving an incomplete 'the *F*' used referentially is unaffected by the ignorance or error of the speaker (provided that she is right that the object in mind is an *F*); that of one involving an incomplete 'the *F*' used attributively is affected by such ignorance and error. Neale claims that the problem of incomplete descriptions is 'essentially the same' whether the description is used referentially or attributively (2000: 284). Perhaps, but the solutions are essentially different. We can hope to solve the problem for the attributive ones within the Russellian framework by adopting the implicit approach (occasionally the explicit). There is no hope of solving the problem for the referential ones without abandoning Russell and adopting RD.

RD can adopt the implicit (occasionally explicit) approach to incomplete attributive ascriptions and incomplete quantifiers in general. Neither the implicit nor the explicit approach gives a plausible account of referentially used incomplete definites. RD does. This is a powerful argument against the Russellian view of definites and hence for RD. The strength of this argument has not been appreciated by defenders of Russell⁴⁷ because they have largely ignored the devastating ignorance and error problem.

There can be no analogous argument for indefinites because no issue of uniqueness arises for them.

8. Argument VI: Exportation from Opaque Contexts

Definites

Quine (1953: 139–59) claimed that the 'exportation' of 'Ortcutt' in the inference from

- (1) Ralph believes that Ortcutt is a spy

to

- (2) Ortcutt is such that Ralph believes him to be a spy

seems to be 'generally implicative'. But such an exportation is not always in order (Kaplan 1969; Sleigh 1967). Thus, consider the inference from

- (3) Ralph believes that the shortest spy is a spy

to

⁴⁷ Neale thinks that the argument from incompleteness is a 'dead-end' and 'futile' (2000: 284).

- (4) The shortest spy is such that Ralph believes him to be a spy.

Exportation seems to be appropriate only from an opaque ascription that requires the believer to be *en rapport* with the object of belief, to have a singular thought about the object.

I have argued (Devitt 1981*a*: chs. 9 and 10) that the inference is in order provided the exported singular term, whether a name, demonstrative, pronoun, or definite, is referential (and nonempty).⁴⁸ So the inference from (1) to (2) is in order because the name 'Ortcutt' is referential and that from (3) to (4) is not because the description 'the shortest spy' is attributive. Next, consider

- (5) Ralph believes that Smith's murderer is insane.

If this is uttered simply on the strength of Ralph's comments at the disgusting scene of the crime, then 'Smith's murderer' cannot be exported because it is attributive. But if the sentence is uttered on the strength of Ralph's comments on observing the murderer Jones in the courtroom, then the definite can be exported because it is referential. The exportation works when the exported term is referential because then the opaque ascription requires that the believer be, like the speaker, *en rapport* with the object of belief. *Rapport* with an object is explained by causal-perceptual links to it.

So the referential-attributive distinction bears on truth conditions and is semantic. RD for definites is confirmed. So far as I know, this argument has not been addressed in the literature.

We can anticipate a Gricean response. The response should not simply follow earlier ones by claiming that when (5) is uttered on the strength of Ralph's courtroom comments the description is a quantifier used to convey a singular thought, for it is not so used in this context. The response should be rather that the description in that utterance of (5) is a quantifier used as a referential term like a name and hence conveying the thought that Ralph has a singular thought about Jones. This response would be plausible if the role of the description in the utterance was a rare one requiring special stage setting. But it is not. The role is a regular established one understood by the audience without any Gricean derivation. Argument VI adds to the case made in arguments I to III that there is a semantic convention of using definites as referential terms.

Indefinites

A similar argument can be made for referential indefinites. Adapt Quine's famous story about Ortcutt. Imagine Tom remarking 'Ralph believes that a man at the beach is a spy' to Dick in two different situations. First situation: Tom is at the beach with Ralph when the man, in fact Ortcutt, is seen by them both. The man's behavior strikes Ralph as very suspicious. Later Tom comes across Dick in the water and makes the remark. (Note that 'the man at the beach' would be inappropriate; s. 5.) In this situation, the

⁴⁸ Names are normally referential. However some like 'Jack the Ripper' are attributive (Devitt 1981*a*: 40-7).

ascription requires rapport and 'a man at the beach' can be exported yielding: 'A man at the beach is such that Ralph believes him to be a spy.' Second situation: Ralph hears that the FBI have received a tip off that there is a man on the beach who is a spy. He reports this so credulously to Tom that Tom makes the remark to Dick. In this situation, no rapport is required and exportation is not in order.

I propose that we treat the exportation of indefinites just as we treated the exportation of other singular terms: they can be exported if they are referential (and non-empty) and not otherwise. For, where the exported indefinite is referential, the opaque ascription requires that the believer be, like the speaker, en rapport with the object of belief. So the referential-attributive distinction bears on truth conditions and is semantic. RD for indefinites is confirmed.⁴⁹

9. Conclusion

I have considered six arguments for RD, for the view that there are referential definites and indefinites, not just referential uses of them.⁵⁰ I put most weight on the positive arguments I to III. IV adds little to these. V is primarily an argument against the Russellian view and has been much discussed. In the end, I claim, it does count strongly for RD (for definites). VI adds a bit to the case. All in all, the case for RD is very strong.⁵¹

Puzzle: given that Donnellan, Chastain, and others have made the frequency of referential uses of descriptions apparent, why are so many philosophers so committed to the view that such uses do not exemplify a convention, or at least not a semantic convention? What more could be said to show these philosophers that the uses are conventional and semantically significant? What would they count as establishing this?

⁴⁹ I am in general sympathy with the line that the referential-attributive distinction is irrelevant to issues of scope. See Kripke (1977); Neale (1990: ch. 4); Ludlow and Neale (1991).

⁵⁰ G. Wilson (1991) has proposed an unusual argument for RD, claiming that definites have a certain three pronominal roles. The criticisms in Simons (1996) and Neale (this volume) make me doubt that the argument holds up.

⁵¹ Kripke made a brief argument against RD based on the anaphoric role of a definite in a certain dialogue (1977: 21). I responded tentatively that the definite might be a 'pronoun of laziness' (Devitt 1981*b*: 522). Neale (1997) has recently provided some evidence for this response.