

A RELEVANCE THEORETIC ACCOUNT OF DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS

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PREVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Definite descriptions have a number of different readings, the most prominent being the referential and attributive readings. On the referential reading, the description ‘The current President of the USA’ is interpreted as “Barack Obama”; read attributively, it is interpreted as “the current President of the USA, whoever it is”. Philosophical work on definite descriptions tends to examine the question of whether the referential/attributive distinction is a semantic or a pragmatic phenomenon. I use Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory to provide a contextualist account of the English definite article, which views all of its uses as arising out of the interplay between semantics and pragmatics. I examine the strengths and weakness of previous contextualist approaches to definite descriptions, and I offer an account that treats the English definite article as encoding a procedural constraint on interpretation, where ‘interpretation’ is understood in terms of relevance theory. According to relevance theory, hearers select the interpretation which yields the greatest cognitive benefits for the least cognitive processing cost. The cost of processing, and the benefits derived from it, vary with the context. Thus, while the procedural constraint encoded by the definite article limits the range of potential interpretations, which interpretation is assigned to a definite description depends on the context.

In addition to the referential and attributive uses, this relevance theoretic view can also account for the other readings of definite descriptions. The view is subject to a serious objection, however, one which faces any relevance theoretic account of a communicative phenomenon.

Because it is not currently possible to quantify cognitive benefits and cognitive processing costs, it does not appear possible to show that the relevance theoretic account of descriptions predicts that a particular interpretation of a description would be the natural interpretation. This would render the account untestable. I argue that with some additions to relevance theory, it is possible to overcome this objection.

PREVIEW

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Many thanks,
Diana C. Puglisi

PREVIEW

Table Of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: The Neo-Strawsonian Account	10
2.1 Strawson.....	10
2.2 The Neo-Strawsonian Account	18
2.3 Problems with the Neo-Strawsonian Account	28
Chapter 3: Contextualist Accounts	33
3.1 The Two-Dimensional Account.....	35
3.2 Problems with the Two-Dimensional Account.....	42
3.3 The Synecdoche Theory	59
3.4 Critique of the Synecdoche Theory	64
Chapter 4: Relevance Theoretic Accounts.....	82
4.1 Relevance Theory	83
4.2 Bezuidenhout's Account.....	90
4.3 Problems with Bezuidenhout's Account.....	97
4.4 Powell's Account.....	107
Chapter 5: Relevance Theory.....	116
5.1 Ostensive Inferential Communication	117
5.2 The Principles of Relevance	119
5.3 Cognitive Processing	132
Chapter 6: An Account of Definite Descriptions.....	155
6.1 The Relevance Theoretic Account.....	155
6.2 Individual Concepts	165
6.3 The Specific, Functional and Predicative Uses.....	180
6.4 Other Individual Concepts	196
6.5 The Problem of Testability	200
Chapter 7: Comparative Assessment of Relevance	203
7.1 A Basic Strategy	203
7.2 Contrived Cases and Interpreters	206
7.3 Available Interpretations.....	211
7.4 Justification and Cognitive Effects	229
7.5 Comparing Processing Costs	237
Chapter 8: The Test Cases	248
8.1 Key Theoretical Assumptions.....	248
8.2 The Attributive Case.....	255
8.3 The Referential Case.....	279
8.4 The Kind-Referring Case.....	286
8.5 Conclusion	295
Bibliography	296

Chapter 1

Introduction

Consider an utterance of the following sentence:

(1.1) The fairy in my pocket is frightened.

The expression ‘the fairy in my pocket’ in (1.1) is a definite description. In attempting to provide an analysis of (1.1), one’s first thought might be to treat it as a directly referential expression, much like a name, whose contribution to the proposition expressed by the utterance in which the expression occurs consists solely in the referent of the expression. It turns out, however, that treating definite descriptions in this way is problematic. If we take the contribution made by a description to the proposition expressed by the utterance in which the description occurs to be exhausted by the description’s referent, then (1.1) would appear to be meaningless, for there is no fairy in my pocket. The description in (1.1) lacks a referent in the actual world, and thus an utterance of (1.1) would seem to express but half a proposition. Intuitively, however, an utterance of (1.1) expresses a complete proposition which we are perfectly capable of understanding.

Bertrand Russell’s solution to this problem was to reject the notion that definite descriptions are directly referential in favor of the view that they are what he called “denoting phrases”.¹ According to Russell, expressions of the form *the F* are quantificational in nature, and the utterances containing them express general propositions. On Russell’s view, an utterance of the form *the F is G* should be given the interpretation in (1.2).²

(1.2) $\exists x(Fx \ \& \ \forall y(Fy \rightarrow x=y) \ \& \ Gx)$

¹ Russell (1905), p. 479

² Ibid., pp. 481-482

Essentially, according to Russell, an utterance of the form *the F is G* says that there is exactly one *F* and it is *G*. (1.1), then, on Russell's view, says that there is exactly one fairy in my pocket and that fairy is frightened. Because Russell interprets the semantics of an utterance of (1.1) as quantificational in nature, we can view it as expressing a complete, though false, proposition despite the fact that there is no fairy in my pocket.

Russell's account of definite descriptions remains highly influential a century later. It has not escaped criticism, however. Strawson, for example, famously objected to Russell's claim that utterances like (1.1) are false, proposing instead to return to a view of definite descriptions as essentially directly referential and address the problem of nonexistent referents by appeal to pragmatic presuppositions.³ Perhaps even more troubling for Russell's account of definite descriptions, however, is the case made by Keith Donnellan for the claim that there are at least two distinct uses of definite descriptions, one of which does not appear amenable to Russell's original analysis.⁴

Donnellan presents us with a number of different cases in an attempt to draw out the intuitive distinction between the different uses of definite descriptions. Take, for instance, the now famous case of Smith's murderer.⁵ Consider the sentence in (1.3).

(1.3) Smith's murderer is insane.

We can imagine two different contexts in which (1.3) might be uttered, and in which the same description – 'Smith's murderer' – is used in two distinct ways. In the first context, imagine we have just discovered Smith, who we know, murdered. Suppose further that neither of us knows

³ Strawson (1950)

⁴ Donnellan (1966), (1968)

⁵ Donnellan (1966), pp. 285-286

who could have done this foul deed. In reaction to the scene, I exclaim (1.3). Intuitively, the description as it occurs in my utterance means something like that suggested by Russell. In uttering (1.3) in this context I mean that the murderer of Smith, whoever it is, is insane. But now imagine that we are in the courtroom watching the trial of Jones for Smith's murder, and that we both know that we share the belief that Jones is the killer. Suppose further that Jones has been behaving in an extremely strange manner all throughout the trial. In response to some of this behavior, I lean over to you and whisper (1.3). In this case, intuitively, I have used the description in (1.3) to refer to Jones. In uttering (1.3) in this case, I am not saying that the murderer of Smith, whoever it is, is insane; I am saying that *Jones* is insane. In the first case, my utterance of (1.3) serves to communicate a general proposition. In the second case, it serves to communicate a singular proposition about Jones.

On the basis examples like forgoing, Donnellan concludes that descriptions have two distinct uses. The attributive use is that seen in the first scenario we examined, where the description appears to operate in accordance with Russell's view of descriptions, and, intuitively, what is communicated is a general proposition. The referential use is that seen in the second scenario, where the description would seem to behave much like a directly referential expression, and, intuitively, what is communicated is a singular proposition. It seems clear that if Donnellan is correct, and there are, in fact, two distinct uses of definite descriptions, then Russell's account alone is insufficient to account for definite descriptions. For while Russell's view of descriptions can easily handle the attributive use of descriptions, it is without the machinery to account for the referential use.

It is now widely accepted that definite descriptions have both an attributive and a referential use. Indeed, since Donnellan identified the referential/attributive distinction, a significant portion of the philosophical work on definite descriptions has been dedicated to attempting to deal with it. Two main camps have long dominated the philosophical landscape surrounding the analysis of definite descriptions and the referential/attributive distinction. Following Neale, let us call these two main opposing viewpoints the *referentialist* and *Russellian* positions. The referentialist view is motivated largely by the intuition that the referential use of a definite description is semantically relevant. To put it another way, the referentialist view is motivated by the intuition that when ‘the F’ in an utterance of the form *The F is G* is used referentially, a singular proposition is explicitly expressed or, to put it in Grice’s terms, is part of what is said. To account for this intuition, the referentialist maintains that definite descriptions are semantically ambiguous between the attributive and referential readings.

In contrast, the Russellian attempts to preserve Russell’s account of the semantics of definite descriptions, claiming that an utterance containing a definite description always explicitly expresses a general proposition. Relying on Gricean or neo-Gricean principles, the Russellian holds that referential uses of descriptions arise in contexts in which an implicature is generated. In such cases, on this view, the utterance explicitly expresses a general proposition, but a singular proposition is implicated. To put it in Gricean terminology, the Russellian holds that when a description ‘The F’ in an utterance of the form *The F is G* is used referentially, a general proposition is what is said, while a singular proposition is what is meant.

A substantial number of arguments have been put forward attempting either to support or undermine both the Russellian and referentialist accounts of the referential/attributive

distinction.⁶ The Russellian's main argument against the referentialist view, however, lies in the claim that the referentialist account violates the principle of theoretical parsimony. In his work on implicature, Grice suggested that when attempting to account for various semantic phenomena, we should adhere to a modified version of Occam's razor – do not multiply senses beyond necessity. This principle, which is sometimes known as *Grice's razor*, essentially tells us that we should not posit extra linguistic senses when it is possible to do without them. Since the Russellian offers an account of the referential use of descriptions which does not require positing an additional sense for definite descriptions, the argument goes, Grice's razor tells us that the Russellian view should be preferred over that of the referentialist, which accounts for the referential/attributional distinction in terms of a semantic ambiguity.

In support of the view that the referential use of descriptions is semantically relevant, Donnellan appealed to cases of misdescription. Consider Donnellan's example of an utterance of (1.4).⁷

(1.4) The man with the martini is sad.

Imagine (1.4) uttered at a party while the speaker gestures at a man who is holding a martini glass filled with clear liquid. Now suppose that the man in question is in fact sad, but unbeknownst to the speaker and hearer, the liquid in the glass is actually just water. The description in such an utterance of (1.4) would appear to be referentially used, and many have

⁶ The body of literature surrounding the debate between Russellians and referentialists is quite large. Since that debate is not the main focus of this work, however, we do not have space to go into it in detail here. Instead, we will limit our focus to an overview of those aspects of the debate which will be relevant to our later discussion of contextualist and relevance theoretic accounts of definite descriptions. For arguments in favor of the Russellian view, see, e.g., Bach (1987), (1994: Ch. 6); Kripke (1977); Neale (1990: Ch. 3), (2004); Salmon (1982), (1991). For arguments in favor of the referentialist view, see, e.g., Barwise & Perry (1983); Devitt (1981), (2004); Wettstein (1981), (1983), (1986).

⁷ Donnellan (1966)

the intuition that the speaker has said something true. This intuition could be taken as evidence that the referential use of definite descriptions is semantically relevant. Not everyone shares the same intuition as to the truth value of such an utterance of (1.4), however. And even if we do take this sort of utterance of (1.4) to be saying something true, it also seems clear that the speaker has done something incorrect. Because the Russellian claims that utterances containing referentially used descriptions linguistically express a general proposition while implicating a singular one, the Russellian has a ready means of explaining this tension in our intuitions. In the cases of misdescription like that of (1.4), the Russellian can claim that the speaker has *said* something false, while *communicating* something true.

Referentialists also argue that the Russellian theory is incapable of handling *incomplete descriptions* – that is, descriptions whose content alone is insufficient to identify a referent. The description in (1.5) is an incomplete description.⁸

(1.5) The table is covered with books.

The description in an utterance of (1.5) would appear to be used referentially. Since the referentialist treats the referential sense of definite descriptions as functioning essentially as demonstratives do, he or she should have no problem accounting for the description in (1.5) or other incomplete descriptions like it. If the Russellian view of descriptions is correct, on the other hand, then an utterance of (1.5) says that there is exactly one table and it is covered with books. As there are many books in the universe, the Russellian account would seem to predict that an utterance of (1.5) is false. Intuitively, however, it is not. Russellians offer two different potential solutions to this problem. The first holds that incomplete descriptions are actually

⁸ The example was originally Strawson's. See Strawson (1950).

complete descriptions in which some of the descriptive content has been elided. The second holds that in the case of incomplete descriptions the domain of quantification is contextually restricted such that there is a unique table in the restricted domain. Whether or not either of these solutions to the problem actually works is a matter of considerable debate between Russellians and referentialists.

In more recent work, however, an alternative to the referentialist and Russellian views of descriptions has emerged – contextualism. This new approach to descriptions would allow us to account for the referentialist’s intuition that the referential use of descriptions is semantically relevant without running afoul of Grice’s razor. According to the contextualist, the linguistic meaning of a definite description is neither referential nor attributive, and gives rise to different explicitly communicated contents depending on how it is contextually supplemented. Thus, in some contexts a general proposition is explicitly communicated, while in others a singular proposition is explicitly communicated. Multiple contextualist accounts of definite descriptions have been proposed over time, differing in their accounts of the linguistic meaning of definite descriptions and how that meaning gives rise to different readings in different contexts. We will look at some of these accounts in detail in later chapters. One contextualist view of definite descriptions relies on the account of communication put forward by Sperber & Wilson – relevance theory.

The overarching goal of this work is to examine the possibility of putting forward a viable relevance theoretic account of English definite descriptions. The relevance theoretic view of communication holds that in most cases, the linguistic meaning of an utterance alone is insufficient to determine a proposition and must be filled in via pragmatic processing. The

account of definite descriptions which will be offered here treats the English definite article as just such a case, contending that the linguistic meaning of an utterance containing a definite description fails to determine a proposition. Instead, on this view, the definite article encodes procedural information which limits interpretation of the description to concepts with individual referents. Thus, the interpretation of the description – including the determination as to whether it is being used referentially or attributively – must be filled in during pragmatic processing.

This pragmatic processing, according to relevance theory, is guided by the search for optimal relevance, and the interpretation which will ultimately be assigned to an utterance is the optimally relevant one. On a relevance theoretic account of definite descriptions, then, a description will be given a referential reading in contexts in which that interpretation is optimally relevant and an attributive reading in contexts in which that interpretation is optimally relevant.

We will discuss relevance theory and the technical definitions of relevance and optimal relevance in much greater detail in chapter 5. Roughly, however, relevance is a ratio of cognitive benefits to cognitive costs. Unfortunately, as we will see, there is no way to quantify cognitive benefits or cognitive costs. As a result, it would seem that we as theorists would be unable to say that a particular interpretation of an utterance is the optimally relevant interpretation, as we would appear to be without the means of quantifying the relevance of any particular interpretation. If this is the case, however, then it will not be possible to test a relevance theoretic account of definite descriptions to determine whether or not it makes accurate predictions as to the natural interpretations of different descriptions in different contexts. Since relevance theory holds that the interpretation which will be selected in a context is the optimally relevant interpretation, if we are unable to show that a particular interpretation of a description is

optimally relevant, we will be unable to demonstrate that our relevance theoretic account of descriptions predicts that a particular interpretation will be assigned to a description in a context. This problem, which we will call the *problem of testability*, presents a serious difficulty which any relevance theoretic account of definite descriptions would have to overcome. Chapters 7 and 8 are dedicated to attempting to address this problem. Before putting forward our own relevance theoretic account of descriptions in chapter 6, however, we will begin by looking at the strengths and weaknesses of previous contextualist accounts.

PREVIEW

Chapter 2

The Neo-Strawsonian Account

Despite the fact that the discussion of definite descriptions has largely centered on the debate between Russellians and referentialists, a number of alternative accounts have been put forward. While not all of these accounts attempt to make sense of the referential/attributive distinction, those that do share the claim that the distinction is an artifact of some level of context dependence in the semantics of definite descriptions. And even those theories which do not pay particular attention to the referential and attributive uses of descriptions hold that the interpretation of utterances containing definite descriptions involves significant pragmatic influences. Though, as we shall see, each of these accounts suffers from significant problems, understanding the successes and failures of previous attempts to characterize definite descriptions as context-dependent should prove useful in attempting to complete our overall goal of constructing a viable relevance theoretic account of definite descriptions. With that in mind, the next few chapters will examine several alternative accounts of definite descriptions, their insights, and their difficulties. Chapter 3 examines the two-dimensional and synecdoche accounts of definite descriptions, while chapter 4 discusses two differing attempts to apply relevance theory to descriptions. This chapter, however, will assess the neo-Strawsonian account.

2.1 Strawson

Before Donnellan had even made us aware of the distinct uses of definite descriptions, P.F. Strawson leveled a number of objections against the Russellian picture of the semantics of

definite descriptions, and proposed a radically different view. The resulting debate between Strawson and Russell was not limited to the question of how to properly characterize definite descriptions, however; it was extensively entangled with broader theoretical issues about the overall understanding of reference, semantics and communication. As a result, many felt that once the overarching theoretical issues were addressed, and in particular, a distinction drawn between sentence meaning and speaker meaning (between semantics and pragmatics), the problems that Strawson found in the Russellian picture dissolved and the intuitions that motivated Strawson's own account could be accounted for.

Murali Ramachandran has argued, however, that even with an understanding of the difference between semantics and pragmatics in place, Strawson's objections to Russell still have a good deal of bite, and that a modified version of his theory is the best way to make sense of definite descriptions in light of these objections.⁹ As we shall see, Ramachandran's proposed replacement of the Russellian characterization of definite descriptions suffers from a number of its own difficulties. Before we can properly discuss Ramachandran's theory, however, we must first have a clear understanding of Strawson's original proposal.

In "On Referring", Strawson claims that Russell's characterization of the semantics of definite descriptions leads to counterintuitive assessments of the truth values of utterances containing empty descriptions – that is, definite descriptions that are not satisfied by any object.¹⁰ To see this consider Strawson's now famous example:

(2.1) The king of France is wise.

⁹ Ramachandran (2008)

¹⁰ Strawson (1950)

Is (2.1) true or false? Uttered during the reign of Louis XIV, (2.1) would have (presumably) been viewed as true. Uttered during the reign of Louis II, on the other hand, it would probably have been seen as false. This, of course, is no problem for the Russellian, since different individuals will be denoted by the description at different times, and hence (2.1) will express different propositions on different occasions of use. But what if (2.1) were uttered at some point during the 20th century? At no point during the 20th century has there been an individual who satisfies the description in (2.1). As a result, many have the intuition that such an utterance would be neither true nor false, that we are not in a position to assign a truth value to an utterance of (2.1) made in the 20th century. But this intuition conflicts with the Russellian's analysis. If Russell and the Russellians are right, then the semantic content of any utterance of (2.1) is *there is exactly one king of France and he is wise*. Since at any point during the 20th century there was no king of France, then, a 20th century utterance of (2.1) would clearly be false.

It might seem, then, that Russell's theory of definite descriptions is incorrect, and we ought to look for an alternative means of accounting for the semantics of definite descriptions. According to Strawson, Russell's mistake lies in his failure to draw the distinction between an expression and the use of that expression, or the parallel distinction between a sentence and a use of that sentence. Once we draw these distinctions, Strawson argues, it becomes clear that the mechanism of reference is not the expression itself, but rather the use of that expression. While the sentence 'The king of France is wise' may have a particular semantic content, it is only partial. And hence the sentence on its own does not express a proposition. Only utterances – that is, sentences in context – can express propositions. And hence only utterances are true or false, and different utterances of the same sentence may have different truth values. The reason that an

utterance of (2.1) during the reign of Louis XIV would be true, while an utterance of the same sentence during the reign of Louis II would be false, then, is the fact that the expression ‘the king of France’ is being used in the two cases to refer to different individuals, and hence, the different utterances express different propositions.¹¹ And since France had no king during the 20th century, the expression ‘the king of France’ could not properly be used to refer to anything during that century. As a result, a 20th century utterance of (2.1) fails to express a proposition or expresses a proposition which is neither true nor false.¹²

Strawson’s evaluation of the phenomena of reference alone is not sufficient to make sense of definite descriptions, however. After all, part of what motivated the Russellian analysis was the fact that when we utter a sentence like (2.1), we do seem to be committing ourselves to the existence of the object identified by the description used. When I claimed at the beginning of this chapter that the third chapter of this work would examine the two-dimensional account of definite descriptions, that gave you every right to believe that a third chapter exists, and that there is, in fact, a two-dimensional account of definite descriptions. But if, as Strawson suggests, the actual device of reference is the use of an expression, there seems little reason to think that an utterance containing a definite description would justify the expectation that something satisfying the description actually exists.

¹¹ Strawson himself does not explicitly make this claim. But if we assume, with Strawson, that the definite description is being used to refer to different individuals, it follows that the associated utterances express different propositions. One utterance expresses the proposition that Louis XIV is wise, the other than Louis II is wise.

¹² Strawson (1950), p. 331

To account for this, Strawson suggests that utterances containing definite descriptions *presuppose* the existence of the object identified by the description.¹³ A presupposition is, essentially, a condition on the truth aptness of an utterance of a sentence. If Strawson is right, (2.1) presupposes the existence of a king of France. If there is a king of France, then an utterance of (2.1) is truth apt. It is true if the king of France is wise and false if he is not. If there is no king of France, however, then the presupposition is not satisfied, and (2.1) is not truth apt. Note, however, that presupposition is a pragmatic phenomenon. While the satisfaction of a presupposition associated with a sentence is essential if an utterance of that sentence is to express a true or false proposition, the presupposition itself is not part of what is asserted by an utterance of that sentence; it is not part of the proposition expressed by the utterance.¹⁴ Thus, because (2.1) presupposes the existence of the king of France, an utterance of (2.1) licenses the hearer to expect that there is indeed a king of France, but because that presupposition is not part of what is asserted by the utterance, the lack of a king of France does not result in a false statement, as it would if Russell's semantic analysis were correct.

Strawson's analysis is not without its problems, however. First, despite the fact that the semantics of definite descriptions proposed by Russell yields a counterintuitive assessment of the truth value of a 20th century utterance of (2.1), the Russellian would have a *prima facie* reason for maintaining his analysis. For while, intuitively, a 20th century utterance of (2.1) lacks a truth value (or, at the very least, we are disinclined to call such an utterance an outright falsehood),

¹³ It is still an open question whether it is utterances or speakers that presuppose. In what follows, I may vacillate between attributing presuppositions to utterances and attributing them to speakers. This imprecision should have no bearing on my arguments, however, since the feature of presupposition that is crucial for our purposes is the failure of an utterance to express a true or false proposition when its associated presupposition fails.

¹⁴ Strawson equates asserted content and proposition expressed. See Strawson (1950) p. 326

Strawson leaves us with no explanation as to how a perfectly meaningful utterance of an indicative statement (for so he would characterize a 20th century utterance of (2.1)¹⁵) can be without a truth value. To put it another way, Strawson has separated meaning from truth aptness. But, intuitively, these two things are closely connected. Given the various motivations for accepting Russell's semantics discussed in chapter one, then, it might be argued that rather than abandoning Russell's analysis, we should instead retain it and look for another explanation of our intuitions with respect to utterances of sentences containing empty descriptions. And in fact, Strawson's distinction between the sentence and a use of that sentence provides the Russellian with theoretical machinery that could easily be used to provide just the sort of explanation he needs.¹⁶ Indeed, the Russellian already makes use of this same distinction in explaining referential uses of descriptions when he claims that referentially used descriptions result in implicated singular propositions. It might very well be, then, that our hesitance to assign a truth-value to a 20th century utterance of (2.1) is similarly the result of factors surrounding the *use* of the utterance.

For the sake of simplifying the discussion, let us assume a Gricean or Neo-Gricean theory of conversational implicature. Now, if the Russellian is correct and, regardless of the circumstances of use, (2.1) semantically expresses the proposition that there is exactly one king of France who is wise, a 20th century utterance of (2.1) would be in violation of the maxim of

¹⁵ Strawson (1950) p. 330-331

¹⁶ I have deliberately left the contours of this distinction vague. Strawson's distinction is, in essence, the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. While there is wide agreement about the existence of such a distinction, the proper characterization of the two domains and the boundary between them has been the focus of protracted debate. The bare acknowledgement of the distinction, however, should be sufficient for any Russellian to explain our intuitions in the case of empty descriptions.

quantity unless it were also being used to express something further.¹⁷ That is, to use Grice's terms, in order to view a 20th century utterance of (2.1) as in line with the cooperative principle, what was said by the utterance could not be what was meant. However, because the context in which our hypothetical utterance is embedded is so scanty (we know only that the utterance is made at some point during the 20th century), we, as interpreters of the utterance, lack a sufficient basis for generating hypotheses about what was meant. We have no foundation from which we might calculate an implicature. So, essentially, we are left with a situation in which we have good reason to think that the proposition expressed by the *use* of (2.1) is not the same as that expressed by (2.1) by itself, but we lack the means of discerning the content of the proposition expressed by the use of (2.1) in question. To put it in Gricean terms, we know *what was said* by the 20th century utterance of (2.1) and we know that something different *was meant*, but we don't have any clue as to what that could be. If we don't know what is being expressed by the utterance, though, then it is no surprise that we are unwilling to assign it a truth-value.

It would seem, then, that the Russellian can make sense of Strawson's problematic empty descriptions without abandoning Russell's original semantic analysis. Since the Russellian can also account for something that Strawson cannot – our intuition that utterances containing empty descriptions are not semantically defective – Strawson's theory lacks the explanatory scope of its competitor.

This is not the only difficulty facing Strawson's proposal, however. Consider modern day utterances of (2.2) – (2.6)

(2.2) The king of France does not exist.

¹⁷ The quantity maxim at issue need not be Grice's quantity maxim. Neo-Gricean versions of the maxim would seem equally well suited to the task. See, e.g. Horn (1972), (1989); Gazdar (1979); Levinson (2000).

- (2.3) P.F. Strawson is not the king of France.
- (2.4) Nobody had lunch with the king of France yesterday.
- (2.5) Necessarily, the king of France is wise.
- (2.6) The king of France is the world's richest man.¹⁸

If Strawson is right in his claim that definite descriptions trigger a presupposition of the existence of the object described, then each of the foregoing utterances should carry with it such a presupposition. And, if the failure of a presupposition associated with an utterance prevents that utterance from expressing a proposition, then we should be hesitant to assign truth values to (2.2)-(2.6) in the same way we are hesitant to assign a truth value to (2.1). But this is not the case. Intuitively, modern day utterances of (2.2)-(2.4) are true, while modern day utterances of (2.5) and (2.6) would be false. These utterances, then, would appear to be counterexamples to Strawson's proposed account of definite descriptions.

Of course, it may be (and in fact has been) argued that (2.2), (2.3) and (2.5) do not presuppose the existence of the king of France. If this is in fact the case, however, the Strawsonian is still responsible for providing an account of why the presupposition is present in one case, but not another. This is an instance of what is known as the *projection problem* for presupposition – the problem of determining when a complex sentence will inherit the presuppositions of its simple components and explaining why presuppositions are inherited in one case but not another. Thus, the Strawsonian might put forward any of a number of proffered accounts of the projection problem in order to explain our willingness to assign truth-values to

¹⁸ These examples are taken from Ramachandran (2008). (2.6) is somewhat contentious. Though many have the intuition that an utterance of (2.6) is false, since the king of France is not Carlos Slim, Bill Gates or Warren Buffet, others have the intuition that an utterance of (2.6) is just as truth valueless as a 20th century utterance of (2.1). Still, those intuitions running counter to Strawson's view, even if mistaken, deserve an explanation.