Discussion

THE STRUCTURE, SEMANTICS, AND USE OF DESCRIPTIONS

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*T*he division of designators into denoting expressions and referring expressions has become a familiar feature of the Russellian orthodoxy in the philosophy of language. At a glance, expressions of the referring kind seem to be unstructured, lacking independently meaningful proper parts, while those of the denoting kind seem to be structured quantifiers, having molecular complexity. Most examples fit this pattern: proper names, indexicals, and demonstratives are unstructured, while definite descriptions and other quantifier phrases are typically structured. On Russell's 1903 theory of denoting, the semantic structure (independently meaningful proper parts) of denoting complexes had proved a source of difficulty for his logic of propositions. The early theory was not only incapable of explaining both how we are supposed to designate complex meanings and how complex meanings are supposed to denote, but was also at odds with the view that proposition and constituent are logically basic, introducing further functional complexes into the propositional complex. Russell's 1905 theory of descriptions reconstrued these apparently structured referring expressions as quantified noun phrases. On the new theory, knowing the meaning of such expressions does not require acquaintance with a specific object, but rather a grasp of the truth-conditions of the sentences in which they occur.[1] One might say that on the new theory, denoting is linked to object-independent truth-conditions, while referring is linked to object-dependent truth-conditions—a connection elaborated and extended by Kripke and Kaplan. This is the situation as Arthur Sullivan paints it in his new book, *Reference and Structure in the Philosophy of Language: a Defense of the*

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[1] Russell articulated the dichotomy in "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description" (1911), *ML*, p. 226; *Papers* 6: 158. For Sullivan's use of this passage, see his anthology, *Logicism and the Philosophy of Language*, pp. 79–80, and *Reference and Structure in the Philosophy of Language*, pp. 13–14, 137, 140 n.15.

Russellian Orthodoxy (2013).

In this work, Arthur Sullivan defends a stronger set of claims than the denoting/referring distinction might historically have entailed. Building on Neale's sharp distinction between semantically unstructured rigid referring expressions and semantically structured restricted quantifiers,[2] Sullivan takes it to be crucial that these categories are exhaustive and exclusive, so that *all and only referring expressions are unstructured designators*, and *all and only denoting expressions are structured designators* (p. 13). Adopting a distinction from Bach,[3] Sullivan maintains that the semantic mechanism of referring designators is simply to conventionally *relate* the utterance of the designator to the designatum, and hence to express object-dependent propositions, while the semantic mechanism of denoting designators is *satisfactional*, expressing a compositional condition which may or may not be satisfied by any object and which thus expresses object-independent propositions (p. 11). In Part 1, Sullivan articulates the orthodox theory of reference in terms of these two exhaustive and exclusive categories of designator and the distinct, corresponding semantic mechanisms by which they designate. In Part 2, he provides arguments in favour of the orthodoxy. In Part 3, he deals with apparent counter-examples, reinterpreting complex demonstratives and referential uses of definite descriptions to bring them into conformity with the strict referring-*versus*-denoting dichotomy. In Part 4, he offers a synopsis and some general conclusions.

Importantly, in Part 2, Sullivan argues that semantic structure is a necessary but not sufficient condition of non-rigidity, that only denoting designnators are non-rigid, that all unstructured designators are rigid designators, and that the lack of semantic structure is necessary and sufficient for status as a referring expression. Contrary to the view which is now popular, Russell regarded ordinary proper names as descriptions in disguise. Sullivan follows Kripke in regarding proper names as unstructured referring expressions, but believes this can be brought into line with the Russellian orthodoxy: even if there are vicariously structured names (e.g. "Bismarck"), the structure of their tokens (e.g. "the first Chancellor of the German empire") prohibits them from use as names.[4] At the semantic level, such cases amount to mundane cases of structured non-rigidity (pp. 39–40, 53–4). "The key condition for a use of a term to count as a name", Sullivan urges, "is that the relevant token is used in a semantically unstructured way so that the token is (intended to be)

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[2] NEALE, "Term Limits" and "Term Limits Revisited".

[3] BACH, *Thought and Reference*.

[4] Sullivan's account builds on Kripke's response to Donnellan's claim that names can be used as abbreviations for non-rigid descriptions. Proper names are always rigid except, perhaps, where they are not used as names (p. 40).

stipulatively linked to one specific individual" (p. 58). Standard intensional possible-world semantics captures differences between designators in terms of functions from worlds to individuals, but obscures the source of these differences in the denoting/referring dichotomy. Likewise, the intensional possible-worlds semantics treatment of general terms as functions from worlds to extensions obscures the distinction between terms which refer to, and those which denote, kinds.[5] Rigidity, Sullivan claims, is an upshot of the semantic phenomenon of referring to and expressing object-dependent (or kind-dependent) information about specific individuals (or kinds) (p. 45).

There are apparent counter-examples to the typical relationship between denoting and semantic structure, most notably descriptions which seem to refer. There are also apparent counter-examples to the typical connection between referring expressions and the lack of semantic structure, most notably complex demonstratives. In Part 3, Sullivan argues that any referential use of a complex designator is an "unstructured use". Sullivan holds that "A complex designator is used in a structured way if and only if the token is used to designate that which (in the relevant context) satisfies the compositionally determined condition the term semantically expresses" (p. 23). In an unstructured use, by contrast, the token stipulatively designates one specific entity. In the case of complex demonstratives, the nominal seems to be constitutive of the semantic meaning of the noun phrase and seems to be thereby exploited in referring, but in fact, Sullivan claims, the nominal is exploited on the pragmatic level only, so that complex demonstratives fail to be instances of semantically structured referring. In the case of descriptions which (seem to) refer, the univocal quantificational semantics of the description is not only operative in referential uses, but particularly suited to such uses. Nevertheless, they fail to be devices of semantic reference. This will require some explanation.

To explain descriptions which (seem to) refer, Sullivan draws on Donnellan's distinction between the *referential* use of definite descriptions to express object-dependent propositions and their *attributive* use to express object-independent propositions.[6] Whereas in attributive uses, speaker meaning is identical to semantic meaning, there is a divergence of speaker meaning from semantic meaning in referential uses, which, on Sullivan's view, is the hallmark of an unstructured use of a molecular designator (p. 90). Though Sullivan does not address the issue, one assumes he can avoid difficulties raised by the presupposition of the existence of the object which satisfies the description by embracing Donnellan's view that the only existence presup-

[5] Sullivan holds that unstructured general terms rigidly refer to kinds "… if and only if one and the same individual is relevant to the possible-worlds truth-condition of propositions expressed by sentences containing it" (p. 44).
[6] DONNELLAN, "Reference and Definite Descriptions".

posed by the (referentially used) descriptive phrase is that of some specific object, not the existence of the object which satisfies the description.[7] Meaningful proper parts of descriptions are rendered "inert" by referential use: the token of the description is used stipulatively to designate a specific individual, and the common nouns are merely a pragmatic device to direct hearers to the relevant object—a device which may serve its purpose even in cases of misdescription (e.g., if one says "the man drinking a martini is sad" where the man is drinking water). In short, referentially used descriptions are not devices of *semantic* reference. For incomplete descriptions, Sullivan indicates a preference for a Russellian treatment, that is, one which invokes implicit background restrictions on the domain of the quantifier. Sullivan's view, however, might be more compatible with that of Soames, who argues that sentences containing incomplete descriptions ("the F" where more than one object satisfies the description) may be handled by taking the meaning of S to be "what is common to what is asserted by utterances of S in all normal contexts, [where] the propositions asserted by particular utterances are required to be pragmatic enrichments of the semantic content of S."[8]

For complex demonstratives, the options are as follows: (*i*) they are rigid referring expressions which only have apparent semantic structure, or (*ii*) they are, at bottom, quantificational. Sullivan takes the first line, some form of which is held almost universally.[9] On Sullivan's account, complex demonstratives are referring expressions which have an "unstructured use", expressing semantically object-dependent propositions. He builds his argument around the case of a speaker who utters "that F is G", with the intention to convey an object-dependent proposition, where the individual is G, but is not an F. On a semantic treatment of the nominal, the semantic value and truth of the utterance depend upon the individual being an F. On the pragmatic treatment of the nominal, the general term(s) following the demonstrative play a pragmatic role in assigning reference, namely, directing the hearer to a specific individual. On this view, "that F is G" is truth-conditionally equivalent to "that is G", so that referring occurs independently of the nominal.[10]

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[7]   The object to which the speaker is referring when he utters "the man drinking a martini is sad" may be a shadow or a pile of dirt. The only requirement is that it not be nothing.

[8]   SOAMES, "Why Incomplete Definite Descriptions Do Not Defeat Russell's Theory of Descriptions", p. 7.

[9]   One notable exception is JEFFREY KING's *Complex Demonstratives*.

[10]   For instance, the speaker utters "that duck is about to eat your sandwich" where the individual the speaker intends to pick out is a seagull, not a duck, but is about to eat the sandwich. "That duck is G" is, in this case, truth-conditionally equivalent to "that is G". On Sullivan's view, the utterance, "that duck is about to eat your sandwich", semantically expresses two propositions: the background proposition, "that

At this point, we have embraced a contemporary referentialist framework with an uncertain connection to a distinctively Russellian conception of reference. One wonders what continuity, if any, exists between the philosophical motivations for Sullivan's strict denoting/referring dichotomy and those underlying Russell's introduction of the distinction. Such a connection is perhaps to be discovered in Sullivan's remarks on Russell's legacy in the philosophy of language contained in the substantive introduction to his 2003 anthology, *Logicism and the Philosophy of Language: Selections from Frege and Russell*. According to the story Sullivan gives there, the Cartesian paradigm of epistemology as first philosophy is superseded, in the logicist tradition, by a semantic paradigm concerned with questions of meaning and inference investigated by the tools of philosophical logic. Nevertheless, Sullivan maintains, there is a "strong strain of Cartesian foundationalism" evident in the logicist project of establishing the grounds of mathematical truths (pp. 31–2). Non-Euclidean geometry resulted in concerns over justifying the choice of axioms, concerns grew over ensuring gapless proofs, and contradictions undermined what had formerly been regarded as "analytic truths". At the same time, mathematics lacked rigorous and fixed meanings for key concepts, for instance, the number terms (pp. 34–5). On my view, Frege and Russell sought to give a "foundation" for mathematics in so far as they sought a universal logic, free of contradictions, in which the branches of mathematics could be analyzed—an aim for which the theory of descriptions played a crucial role. However, concern for gapless proofs was not unique to Frege and Russell, but shared with their nineteenth-century precursors. Though Russell's explicit definitions secured fixed meanings for the number terms, it is not clear that this was essential to his logicism, or that he regarded them as any more rigorous than those provided by Cantor and Dedekind. Moreover, Russell thought the upshot of the apparent crisis in axiom choice arising from non-Euclidean geometry was precisely that the "objects" introduced by the axioms do not have fixed meanings.[11] Foundationalism aside, Sullivan holds (I think, uncontroversially) that issues in the foundation of mathematics led to a clarification of the limits of traditional subject-predicate logic and the corresponding expressive limits of natural language. Russell, who treated grammar as a not always reliable guide to logical form, was instrumental in establishing the philosophy of language as an autonomous subject-matter (*ibid.*, p. 43), separate from psychology and psychologistic theories of meaning.

is a duck", and the official proposition, "that is about to eat your sandwich". The truth-conditions of the utterance are those of the official proposition. This is the approach articulated by Eros CORAZZA in "Complex Demonstratives *qua* Singular Terms".

[11] My arguments for these claims are given in Chapter 3 of GALAUGHER, *Russell's Philosophy of Logical Analysis*.

Russell's distinction between referring and denoting expressions arose, on Sullivan's account, from considering the semantics of quantification. There is, at this point in Sullivan's reconstruction, a shift in the direction of influence between philosophy of logic and language. Sullivan places emphasis on the fact that regarding quantified noun phrases as "denoting concepts" proved an unhappy exception to Russell's referentialist semantics (*Logicism*, p. 69). The theory of descriptions allowed him to account, from within a semantic monist theory, for the same data as that which was accounted for by Frege's theory of sense and reference: "The strategy," Sullivan tells us, "is to limit the range of referentialism, by drawing Frege's distinction between quantified noun phrases and referring expressions in a different place" (p. 75).[12] According to Sullivan, Russell's quantifiers, like Frege's, behave semantically as functions from predicates to truth-values. The difference is simply that Russell included expressions of the form "the *F*" among quantified noun phrases, so that to know the meaning of "the *F*" is to grasp the truth-conditions of the sentence in which it occurs. On my view, Russell's conception of analysis differs sharply from Frege's. His new analysis of sentences containing denoting phrases is, rather, a technique designed to make workable a theory which obviates the contradiction and preserves the theory of the transfinite within a logic in which proposition and constituent remain the basic units of analysis.[13] This is more in keeping, in any case, with Sullivan's earlier statement that the use of philosophical logic in developing the logicist programme led to key developments in the philosophy of language. The difficulty with denoting concepts is that they occur in propositions as structured meanings, but as structured meanings they fail to denote. In so far as they do denote, we are unable to mention the meaning of a denoting concept without invoking its denotation. Moreover, complex denoting concepts themselves function in the proposition precisely like the Fregean mathematical functions that Russell was struggling to eliminate. Of course, with the theory of descriptions secured, Russell invoked the denoting/referring distinction (and scope distinctions) to address issues in philosophical logic, including the substitutivity of co-referring terms

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[12] On Sullivan's account, Russell held that a referring expression that does not designate anything is nonsense and that co-extensive referring expressions make the same contributions to propositional content (*Logicism*, p. 81). In fact, it is controversial whether Russell embraced conventional denotations (the null-class) for apparently denotationless denoting concepts, or held that there are denoting concepts which denote non-beings. Moreover, Russell held that differences in intension correspond to real differences. However, Sullivan is surely correct that the criticisms Russell levelled at semantic dualism in "On Denoting" were levelled chiefly against his own earlier theory of denoting.

[13] For the details of my interpretation, see GALAUGHER, "Substitution's Unsolved 'Insolubilia' ".

salve veritate, and related issues of co-reference in propositional attitudes—issues which Sullivan's defence of the Russellian orthodoxy also aims to address.

Sullivan has a wider view than Russell of semantic referring, which, on Sullivan's account, includes proper names (used as names), indexicals, unstructured demonstratives, Boolean referring expressions, natural kind terms, molecular proper names, and—since "that" is the only device of semantic reference in their case—complex demonstratives. In contrast to Russell, he holds that descriptions which seem to refer are semantically structured and have referential uses, though they are not devices of semantic reference and have no semantically structured referential meanings. An advantage of Sullivan's analysis of designators is that it provides a clear condition for the substitutivity of co-designative terms *salve veritate* that can be extended to propositional attitudes. If two terms "*a*" and "*b*" are used as names—that is, have a semantically unstructured use, where the token is stipulatively linked to a specific individual—and are co-referential, then "*Fa*" and "*Fb*" express the same proposition. The truth-conditions of an attitude ascription ("*S φ*'s that *Fa*") are undisrupted by the interchange of co-referential names (*Reference and Structure*, pp. 64–5).

In "unstructured uses" of complex designators, Sullivan tells us, it is "the speaker's stipulative object-dependent intention that grounds the connection between the token uttered and its reference", and not any semantic properties of the designator *per se* (*ibid.*, p. 115). He recommends Kripke's counterfactual test for determining whether the truth-conditions of an utterance are object-dependent or object-independent by considering them across contexts of evaluation (pp. 59–61, 85). Recall that despite referential uses, "the" suffers no semantic ambiguity: the semantics of the description is merely exploited at the pragmatic level by the hearer to determine reference, but there is no referential meaning. It is for this reason that descriptions can misdescribe and yet say something true. However, it seems to me that in referential uses of descriptions, the fact that semantic structure is exploited at the pragmatic level to determine reference is nullified by the fact that the speaker's object-dependent intention connects the token uttered to its reference. Consider person *A*'s utterance, "The man drinking a martini is sad", where the man the speaker intended to designate is sad, but is drinking water. Now suppose the man next to him is also sad, but is drinking a martini. The hearer, *B*, grasps that the truth-conditions are object-dependent and exploits the semantic meaning at the pragmatic level to focus on the man drinking a martini, but this will have diverged from the speaker's stipulative object-dependent intention. In fact, it would seem on Sullivan's account that although *B* has exploited the semantic meaning of the utterance to pick out the designatum, she has picked out the wrong object.

Suppose *B* now says "the man drinking a martini is not sitting" where the man drinking a martini is standing, and *A* replies "the man drinking a martini is sitting" where the man she intended to designate is sitting. The counterfactual test for ascertaining the truth-conditions of these utterances may be unavailing.[14] If asked whether her utterance would have been false if the man were drinking water, *B* is liable to say it would indeed have been false, not because she had intended to use the description attributively, but for the very reason that (or so *B* thought) structured semantic meaning is exploited at the pragmatic level to pick out reference. Since the designatum is not a function of the meaningful parts of the expression, *A*'s utterance is false only in case the expression was intended attributively. Otherwise, it says something true. Clearly, what is true cannot be identified with the token of the sentence *A* uttered, which is (literally) false. What is true might, perhaps, be identified (*i*) with the token of some sentence containing a name, e.g. "Jones is sitting", or (*ii*) with the token of some sentence containing a description which does not misdescribe, e.g. "the man drinking water is sitting".[15] In the case of (*i*), one wonders what distinguishes a description used referentially from a name. Are referentially used descriptions disguised names and, hence, not denoting designators at all? In the case of (*ii*), the referent designated by the referentially used description satisfies the condition compositionally determined by the description in the corresponding sentence, but it is not clear whether this new description is now used referentially or attributively. If it is used attributively then what is truly said is not said of the referent picked out by the original referentially used description. If it is used referentially, then what grounds the connection of the token uttered to its reference?[16]

For the crucial distinction in the Russellian orthodoxy which motivates our concern over such details, recall Russell's distinction: "A man's name is what he is called, but however much Scott had been called the author of *Waverley*, that would not have made him be the author; it was necessary for him actually

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[14] Sullivan illustrates this counterfactual test for different uses of names (*Reference and Structure*, p. 61) and for different uses of descriptions (p. 85).

[15] Or perhaps it may be identified with the token of some sentence containing a demonstrative, e.g. "that is sitting", which is truth-conditionally equivalent.

[16] The only alternative I can envision is to introduce the requirement that something is the (semantic) referent of a description used referentially if the speaker has a stipulative object-dependent intention and the referent uniquely satisfies the description in the context of utterance. Or we might say that no propositions (rather than object-dependent propositions) are expressed where descriptions are used referentially (in an unstructured way). The description in this case would not be a quantifier phrase, but a linguistic meaning—the sort of denoting concept with which Russell wished to dispense. Complex demonstratives are another case of referring in virtue of structured meanings which do not constitute the (truth-conditionally significant) proposition expressed by the sentence in which the complex designator occurs.

to write *Waverley*, which was a fact having nothing to do with names."[17] Just as Russell was led to regard names as disguised descriptions, we might be led to regard the so-called referentially used descriptions as disguised names. However, it is to preserve the distinction, not between names and descriptions, but between semantically unstructured referring designators and semantically structured quantifiers, that Sullivan holds that descriptions designate by means of a satisfactional semantic mechanism, expressing a compositionally determined condition by which the designatum is denoted, but that, when referentially used, they are not devices of *semantic* reference at all. This precludes analyses on which "the" is ambiguous while also preventing descriptions from functioning like names used as names. Sullivan is committed, then, to a parsimonious semantics to be strictly sequestered from the pragmatic dimensions of meaning. This requires an account of how the semantics and pragmatics are to interact. Perhaps Sullivan intends that, as in the case of complex demonstratives, *A*'s utterance "the man drinking a martini is sitting" expresses a background proposition, "(the x: x is drinking a martini) x is sitting", and an official proposition, "α is sitting", where the background proposition is truth-conditionally irrelevant. The semantically structured description is not always intended, in referential uses, merely to serve the pragmatic function of directing the hearer to the referent. If a speaker utters "the woman you had wanted to meet is wearing glasses", intending to designate a specific object he or she believes satisfies the condition compositionally determined by the description, it seems to me that "is wearing glasses" is intended to play the role of directing the hearer to the referent described. Does "α is wearing glasses" then become the background proposition, and can it be truth-conditionally irrelevant? The semantically structured description is not always irrelevant to the truth conditions of the proposition expressed by the utterance. For instance, *B*'s utterance, "the man drinking a martini is not sitting", might be used by *A* to determine the correct designatum of her own referentially used description. She might then say "Oh, you're quite right. The man *drinking a martini* is not sitting." How could the semantics of the description be truth-conditionally irrelevant in this case? Surely what is interesting in this case is not expressed by the so-called official proposition "α is wearing not sitting". Oddly, the truth-conditional irrelevance of the background proposition seems guaranteed only in the case of descriptions used as names, e.g. "the 5K we are running isn't a 5K after all", which says something informative, not false, because the description is clearly being used conventionally as a name to say something true of the specific object stipulated by the speaker. Despite Sullivan's insistence that, unlike names, descriptions are never

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[17] RUSSELL, "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description", *ML*, p. 226; *Papers* 6: 158.

devices of semantic reference, the speaker's communicative intentions do not always correspond to the official proposition, which strikes me as being essentially a case of using a complex term as a name.[18]

The problem with Russell's theory of denoting concepts was not that of how to account for structured meanings which fail to denote anything, but that of accounting for how structured meanings denote. The denoting concept is a meaning with a direct relation of denoting to a denotation. However, denoting complexes (structured meanings) are made up of the meanings of their constituents. The denotations of these constituent meanings do not give the denotation which is supposed to be given by the complex. The problem, then, is not that of denotationless denoting concepts, but with denoting by means of complex meanings. This insight prompted the radical thesis introduced by Russell's new theory and defended by Sullivan that denoting designators are always structured quantifiers. The failure of reference in the case of referentially used descriptions has been taken by Donnellan and perhaps by Sullivan to be exhausted by the failure of the speaker to intend any object, but the problem may be that descriptions (as quantified noun phrases) simply do not refer.

Even if it is granted that referentially used descriptions are not devices of semantic reference, it remains to explain precisely how descriptions are exploited in referential uses to express a speaker's object-dependent intention. Sullivan offers a battery of plausible arguments in defence of his thesis that the structured denoting/unstructured referring dichotomy is exhaustive and exclusive. Since the thesis rests on the claim that referentially used descriptions are not devices of semantic reference, however, its defence calls for a detailed account of both the propositions (semantically and non-semantically) expressed by utterances containing referentially used descriptions and their truth-conditions. We may wish to follow Sullivan in excluding the semantically structured description from an account of the truth-conditions of the proposition expressed by the utterance containing it. However, this does not spare us the difficulty of determining what is communicated by the utterance, and since this is a function not only of semantics but also of what is implicated, the difficulties accumulate.[19] I suspect a resolution of these difficulties will require us to conclude that, in such cases, the speaker's object-dependent intentions are insufficient for determining the connection of a token to its reference.

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[18] Sullivan acknowledges that what is communicated is a function of what is semantically expressed and what is pragmatically implicated (*Reference and Structure*, p. 144 n.13).

[19] For various key distinctions concerning implicature, see JENNIFER SAUL, "Speaker Meaning, What Is Said, and What Is Implicated".

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