'The distinction between referential and attributive uses of descriptions shows that Russell's Theory of Descriptions is wrong.' Does it?

In order to address this question, we need firstly to describe what we mean by descriptions, then to distinguish between the referential and attributive uses, and finally to describe Russell's Theory of Descriptions. Once we've laid this groundwork, we'll then be in a position to say whether or not Russell's Theory of Descriptions can account for the supposed referential use of descriptions which, to get ahead of the argument slightly, is the problematical case.

This essay is indebted to the following papers, in addition to lecture notes:

- "On Denoting" by Bertrand Russell[1].
- "On Referring" by Peter Strawson[2].
- "Reference and Definite Descriptions" by Keith Donnellan[3].
- "Definite Descriptions" by Richard Larsen and Gabriel Segal[4].
- "Descriptions" by Mark Sainsbury[5].

Descriptions

Our question refers only to "descriptions", but we will concentrate on <u>definite</u> descriptions, as this is what Russell's Theory is about. Also, <u>in</u>definite descriptions, being non-specific, are less likely to be used referentially, so there will be less of a problem for Russell in the context of our question. After laying out the groundwork on definite descriptions, I will return to a possible objection to this view.

Definite descriptions (in English) are of two syntactic forms. Firstly, "the F is G"; examples (some of them famous) being:

1. "The present King of France is bald".
2. "The man over there drinking a martini is French".
3. "The door squeaks".
4. "The owner of that dirty car is lazy".

Secondly, "X's F is G"; for which the famous example (from Donnellan) is:

5. Smith's murderer is insane.

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[1] *Mind*, Vol. 14, Issue 56, Oct. 1905.
[2] *Mind*, Vol. 59, Issue 235, Jul. 1950.
[3] *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 75, Issue 3, Jul. 1966.
[4] Chapter 9, *Knowledge of Meaning: an Introduction to Semantic Theory*, Bradford, MIT, 1995.
[5] *Philosophy 1: a guide through the subject*, A. C. Grayling, (Ed.), 1995, pp. 77-86.

In the above, the "definiteness" is determined by the "the", or the "X's", while the "description" is determined by the noun phrase "F". The predicate, "G", is not part of the definite description, but is supplied to complete the sentence.

Examples of indefinite descriptions are similar to the above, but without the definiteness. Eg. "A present king of France…". Another example would be Russell's "I met a man". It looks as though we have a particular man in mind, but we'll see shortly that Russell denies that this is what's affirmed.

Attributive & referential uses of descriptions

This distinction can be illustrated either by examples (2) and (4) or by ambiguities (or context-dependence) in example (5).

In example (2) it seems that we do intend to refer. There is a particular "man over there" we have in mind, and we are successful even if we are wrong about certain particulars of the description, such as if the man in fact has iced water in his martini glass. In example (4), however, we probably have no idea who the owner of the car is, so we couldn't be referring to any particular individual. Having said this, there are situations in which (2) is used attributively – as when we've heard a rumour of a French Martini-drinker "over there", but haven't clapped eyes on him yet. Similarly, there are cases where (4) is used referentially – as when earlier on in the conversation we've demonstrated that we know who the owner is, and are making a further derogatory point.

Example (5) is ambiguous, or at least context-sensitive. In the attributive usage, we have no particular individual in mind, but are asserting that whoever Smith's murderer is, he is insane. That is, whoever perpetrated this dastardly deed in so grotesque a manner must have been insane. However, in the referential case we are thinking of a particular person. That person (Jones, say) raving in the dock, whom we have every reason to believe is Smith's murderer since he's just admitted that Smith "had it coming to him", is insane.

Earlier on, we dismissed indefinite descriptions as not capable of referring. However, there are cases where the indefinite article is used, but which appear to refer, such as the example quoted earlier from Russell.

We'll see later that there appear to be hybrid or intermediate cases, and that the usage may be a matter of degree.

Russell's Theory of Descriptions

Russell distinguishes between denotation and reference. A denoting phrase is in perfectly good order even where the thing denoted (eg. "the golden mountain") does not exist. Denotation has to do with meaning, whereas reference has to do with things. Names refer, and there is a problem if the reference doesn't exist, which is why Russell restricts logically proper names to the demonstrative pronouns "this" and "that".

Russell's theory of definite descriptions is to treat them not as disguised names or referring expressions, but as quantifier phrases. Hence, our example (1) is translated as:

> "There is at least one person who is presently King of France, and at most one person who is presently King of France, and that person is bald."

Or, in predicate calculus notation:

> $(\exists x)(Kx \ \& \ (\forall y)(Ky \rightarrow y=x) \ \& \ Bx)$

The advantage of Russell's theory, in addition to solving various puzzles that need not detain us here, is that it gives a definite truth-value to sentences containing definite descriptions where the subject of the description doesn't exist. Sentences involving <u>names</u> – ie. of the form Ba – ask us first to identify the named "a" and then to determine whether it warrants the predicate "B". Russell's formulation, by treating definite descriptions as quantifier phrases rather than names, avoids positing the shadowy existence (or subsistence) of non-existent objects, as Meinong had proposed.

An <u>in</u>definite description is formulated without the uniqueness condition. "A present king of France is bald" comes out as:

> $(\exists x)(Kx \ \& \ Bx)$

Russell's formulation means that both of the above two statements come out false, since it is false that $(\exists x)(Kx)$. It also helps us understand intensional contexts such as "George IV wanted to know whether the author of Waverley was Scott". If "the author of Waverley" is a referring expression, we ought to be able to substitute its reference, giving "George IV wanted to know whether Scott was Scott". However, this utterly changes the meaning. As Russell wryly remarks "… an interest in the law of identity can hardly be attributed to the first gentleman of Europe".

What about Russell's "I met a man". Russell formulates this as

> "'I met x, and x is human' is not always false".

… which is Russell's complicated way of saying

> "There is at least one x such that x is human and I met him".

Or, in predicate calculus notation:

> $(\exists x)(Hx \ \& \ Mx)$

The formulation for definite descriptions of the form "X's F is G" a similar to "The F is G", because it can be understood as "The F of / belonging to X is G". So, "Smith's murderer" is "the murderer of Smith". So, we have

"There is at least one person who is the murderer of Smith, and at most one person who is the murderer of Smith, and that person is insane."

Or, in predicate calculus notation:

$$(\exists x)(Mx \ \& \ (\forall y)(My \rightarrow y=x) \ \& \ Ix)$$

Problems for Russell's Theory

We are not asked to consider all the problems faced by Russell's Theory of Descriptions, only whether the distinction between the referential and attributive uses of descriptions causes it a problem.

Russell's theory is designed for the attributive use. Russell must be at least half right, because in the "whoever he is" cases, such as the usual interpretation of our example (4) – "the owner of that dirty car (whoever he is) is lazy" – we definitely do <u>not</u> intend to refer to any specific individual, since we don't know who that individual <u>is</u>. The question is whether Russell's theory covers all cases of definite descriptions, specifically those that look as though they are referential but not attributive.

Russell's theory was invented to distinguish singular terms that refer (which act as names) from those that don't. He also wanted to develop a logically ideal language that correctly describes the world of facts. The problem arises when we consider natural languages; in particular, if we want a single theory to cover all cases of "The F" or "X's F". Problems arise in two circumstances: those of under-specification and those where we intend to refer.

The case of under-specification is where there's no suggestion of global uniqueness. Our example (3) was "the door is open"; but there may be more than one door, even in the room under consideration. "Smith's hat was left on the bus"; but he may have more than one hat. The solution to this problem as such is, thankfully, outside the scope of the question before us, though we will briefly address it later.

Cases where we intend to refer are such as our example (2) or "that's Smith's hat" or "the ball's in the back of the net". These may also suffer from problems of under-specification, which we will ignore.

Responses to the problems of referential uses of definite descriptions

At one level, Russell might have been happy to accept the ambiguity of "the" – a referential and an attributive use – as he's not particularly concerned with natural languages. However, Kripke has characterised such an approach as "lazy", so we ought to see whether Russell's theory will cover both the attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions, whether or not Russell intended it to do so.

However, Russell does claim that no definite description refers and, consequently, is committed to the view that while, in example (2), "the door" denotes a particular door, it doesn't refer to it. Hence, it is correctly analysed, according to Russell, in the standard form:

"There is at least one door, and at most one door, and that door squeaks."

Or, in predicate calculus notation:

$(\exists x)(Dx \ \& \ (\forall y)(Dy \rightarrow y=x) \ \& \ Sx)$

Hence, we seem to be making a false statement, since there are rather a lot of doors in the world. There are various responses to this sort of problem. The first, and maybe best, is to say that in this case, "the" is equivalent to "that", in which case Russell is happy with the description referring. If we don't take this option, we can try to counter either by saying that strictly-speaking we speak falsely, though the context indicates what we mean, or that there's a domain restriction that ties down which door we're referring to. Sainsbury notes that domain restriction applies generally to quantifiers (as in "there's no more chalk"), though saying what we mean in the "doors" case is tricky.

Strawson's view on definite descriptions is that they are <u>always</u> intended to refer, and where they fail to do this, they are deficient and any statement containing such a failed definite description has no truth value. Sainsbury points out that this won't do in the general case (as we'd already seen in the "whoever it is" cases). Sainsbury's point is that we want a statement like "the greatest prime number doesn't exist" to come out true, rather than to be of no truth-value, despite the fact that "the greatest prime number" doesn't refer.

So, rejecting the universal referential use of definite descriptions, the thesis remaining before us (due to Donnellan, in support of some of what Strawson says) is that the "the" in a definite description is semantically ambiguous. Sometimes it has, as in Russell's account, an attributive use and on other occasions it has a referential use, approximating to "that". There seem to be two ways of attacking this proposal. The first is to deny any sharp contrast between the two uses, thus denying semantic ambiguity. The second is to say that there's a distinction between the meaning and the use of assertions.

Taking Donnellan's example of the non-martini drinker; according to Russell, the statement "The man over there drinking a martini is French" is semantically a quantifier expression, which is literally false. It translates into:

$(\exists x)(Mx \ \& \ Ox \ \& \ Dx \ \& \ (\forall y)((My \ \& \ Oy \ \& \ Dy) \rightarrow y=x) \ \& \ Fx)$

The statement is false, on this formulation, because there is no <u>M</u>an who is <u>O</u>ver there and is <u>D</u>rinking martini, even if the water-drinker should happen to be French.

However, such a false statement can be successfully used to refer, and consequently to make what seems to be a statement that is true of the person referred to. We know what the speaker means. Even so, the speaker has made a mistake, and Russell's formulation, but not Donnellan's, points this out. The successful reference is presumably because human speakers make the most of the situational cues and the presumption of the speaker's rationality to deduce what someone means even if what he says appears obscure or irrelevant. The classic example of the meaning of a statement in use differing from its semantic meaning is that (due to Grice) of the job reference given for an inept philosopher – "he's an excellent organiser". Despite the praise, the lack of reference to philosophical ability is taken to deny it.

Getting back to Donnellan's example, the point at issue is, however, that even if the man was drinking martini, we haven't referred to him, according to Russell, but only denoted him. The response seems to be that it's not the form of words that makes the reference, because (taken literally) they don't even denote anyone. Rather, it's in the use of the words, and the context in which they are used.

What would we claim if we were to say that "the" is ambiguous? We have genuine semantic ambiguity where there are two distinct meanings of a word which only the context can disambiguate, as in "I am going to the bank" – only the context can decide whether I mean financial institution or river bank.

In order to refer to X as "the F":

> a) The speaker must intend to refer to some object known by both speaker and hearer to be uniquely F.
> b) The hearer must know that the speaker intends to refer to X.
> c) Both speaker and hearer must know that the words the speaker uses are intended to refer to X.

These subtle requirements can't form part of the semantics of the utterance itself. They are simply part of the use of the expressions in question. Any ambiguity is use ambiguity rather than semantic ambiguity. We distinguish between "speaker's reference" and "semantic reference".

In the "bank" case, it's always cut and dried what I mean once the disambiguation has been undertaken. However, various factors enter into the interpretation of our example "Smith's murderer is insane". I may be variously convinced that the facts of the case indicate that the perpetrator, whoever he is, is insane; and be variously convinced of Jones's guilt, and of Jones's insanity based on his current behaviour; and be variously convinced of my hearer's knowledge of the facts of the case and of the individuals involved. Depending on where I stand on all these issues, my statement should be understood at different places on the scale between attributive and referential usage. But this vagueness isn't a semantic vagueness in the words I use, only in my use of them and my hearer's understanding.

One worry about this approach is that the use of language presupposes the systematic meaning of words, and we seem to be undermining this idea by making meaning profoundly and holistically context-sensitive. However, we may be able to argue that all is in good order at the speech-act level, or at the syntactic level in a logically perfect language, but that problems arise when we try to take our imperfectly syntactically structured natural language at face value.

Conclusion

I agree with Sainsbury's conclusion, that Russell's account is sufficient to explain all uses of definite descriptions, and that the challenge of the so-called referential use can be met. Russell's thesis is a semantic one, so is not threatened by, and can co-exist with, the pragmatic uses that Donnellan raises.