ESSENTIALLY INCOMPLETE DESCRIPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I offer a defence of a Russellian analysis of the referential uses of incomplete (mis) descriptions, in a contextual setting. With regard to the debate between a unificationist and an ambiguity approach to the formal treatment of definite descriptions (introduction), I will support the former against the latter. In 1. I explain what I mean by "essentially" incomplete descriptions: incomplete descriptions are context dependent descriptions. In 2. I examine one of the best versions of the unificationist "explicit" approach given by Buchanan and Ostertag. I then show that this proposal seems unable to treat the normal uses of misdescriptions. I then accept the challenge of treating misdescriptions as a key to solving the problem of context dependent descriptions. In 3. I briefly discuss Michael Devitt's and Joseph Almog's treatments of referential descriptions, showing that they find it difficult to explain misdescriptions. In 4. I suggest an alternative approach to DD as contextuals, under a normative epistemic stance. Definite descriptions express (i) what a speaker should have in mind in using certain words in a certain context and (ii) what a normal speaker is justified in saying in a context, given a common basic knowledge of the lexicon. In 5. I define a procedure running on contextual parameters (partiality, perspective and approximation) as a means of representing the role of pragmatics as a filter for semantic interpretation. In 6. I defend my procedural approach against possible objections concerning the problem of the boundaries between semantics and pragmatics, relying on the distinction between semantics and theory of meaning.[1]

Keywords: context-dependence, definite descriptions, semantics-pragmatics distinction, Bertrand Russell

Introduction: The debate between unificationism and ambiguity thesis

In the few years since the centenary celebration of "On Denoting", the discussion on definite descriptions has generated a greater number of papers than the total of those written on the topic in the one hundred years after 1905. This abundance of material has concerned many problems in Russell's theory.[1] Three of the main problems are (i) the place of incomplete descriptions, that is definite descriptions like "the table" which are unable to define a unique object in the world; (ii) the distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions; (iii) the apparently normal use of misdescriptions, that is literally false descriptions which succeed in individuating the referent. Behind these problems we find a fundamental question: are definite descriptions best represented as incomplete symbols in disguise, or as semantically ambiguous between a quantificational reading and a referential reading? Unificationists maintain that definite descriptions are better represented as general propositions, while ambiguity theorists claim that we

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1   Including anthology of Reimer & Bezuidenhout (2004), the 2005 issue of *Mind* dedicated to Russell's theory, and the 2007 issue of EuJAP dedicated to the definite descriptions.

need to distinguish the logical form of attributive and referential cases and treat the latter as expressing singular propositions.

The ambiguity thesis was clearly presented for the first time by Saul Kripke (1975), who rejected it, "accommodating" the difference between referential and attributive uses, proposed by Donnellan (1966), by means of the distinction between speaker's reference and semantic reference. Neale (1990, 71, 106) claimed that the debate lacks real substance and that the *Russellian analysis is basically correct for both attributive and referential uses*. His claim has been smoothened in various subsequent papers, partly thanks to the new defence of the ambiguity thesis put forward by Michael Devitt, who has provided many arguments against the unificationist claim. I will work at the intersection of the three problems listed above, defending a unificationist view coherent with Russell and interpreting definite descriptions as expressions of general propositions even in the case of referential uses. In the following I will first define what I mean by "essentially" incomplete descriptions, and then I will focus on referential uses of definite descriptions. The main point of my paper will concern the referential uses of *mis*descriptions as a test case that any theory of definite descriptions has to deal with. The solution to referential uses of definite misdescriptions will prove to be a unified solution to attributive and referential uses of definite descriptions.

1. Essentially incomplete descriptions

An incomplete DD is a description that does not specify a condition sufficient to identify a single object, because the property used in the description attaches to more than one individual, unless some further specification is given. Typical examples discussed in the literature are descriptions like "the table" or "the guy", where it is clear that more than one table or one guy exist. There are three main cases of incompleteness:

(i) the description is incomplete because of the implicit domain: we need to restrict the domain of interpretation to a "local" domain (there are many tables in the world, but only one in my room; there are many dogs in the world, but only one is in the neighbourhood);

 (ii) the description is incomplete because of the implicit point of view: there is more than one item which satisfies the description in the already restricted domain, but the speaker and the hearer have access to it through some intended specifications; for instance, there may be more than one dog in the neighbourhood, but it is clear that I am referring to *my* dog;

(iii) the description is incomplete because of its approximation or granularity; for instance "the nearest object" may concern something depending on the goal of the discourse or on the kind of tools to be used, like hands or pincers of a microrobot.

Incomplete definite descriptions seem to be the most common kinds of definite descriptions, as Bach (2004a) claims. Using these common cases we may give a definition of "incompleteness" according to the fact that most definite descriptions require some kind of contextual specification. Therefore not only descriptions like "the table" or "the guy", but also descriptions like "the present king of France", "the man drinking a martini" – to cite some of the most well known examples – can be considered "incomplete" from this wider point of view. They are in need of some completion, be it a specification of the context of utterance, of the context of interpretation, of the domain, or of properties that help to disambiguate the intended referent. As defined above, incomplete definite descriptions can be used to refer to different individuals not only depending on the time of utterance, but also depending on the speaker's or hearer's interpretation, or their respective cognitive access. For instance, "the present King of France" may refer to different individuals depending on the time of the utterance.[2]

I shall therefore speak of "essentially incomplete description" as a reminder of a general aspect of definite descriptions, their context dependence:

> E.I.D. Definite descriptions almost always require *some* contextual element to identify the unique individual they are supposed to refer to. Without the completion of a contextual element, definite descriptions may refer to more than one individual.

What is to be understood by "contextual element" will be defined more clearly later. If incomplete definite descriptions become the leading paradigm of definite descriptions, then a proper treatment of incomplete descriptions may lead us to the proper treatment of definite descriptions, generally speaking.

2. The "template" approach and the problem of misdescriptions

The discussion of incomplete descriptions presents a great divide: firstly, some (such as Schiffer 2005) deny the viability of a Russellian treatment, while others claim that, with some restrictions, a Russellian treatment is "basically correct" (see Neale 1990, 71, 106 and Neale 2005). The aim of this paper is to support the second stance, while criticizing the details used to support it. Inside the second camp we find a contrast between implicit and explicit approaches, giving different logical forms to the definite descriptions. The explicit approach treats the logical form of an assertion containing an incomplete description as follows:

(EA) [the *x*: *Fx* & *Hx*] *Gx*

where "H" is a completion which disambiguates the incomplete definite description. The completion can be considered as a result of an implicature; "*Fx*" is what is said,

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2   As Russell 1957 implicitly accepted, speaking of egocentricity, that is dependence on *where*, *when* and *by whom* the sentence is uttered (the adjective "present", in "the present King of France", apparently depends on the time of the utterance).

and "*Fx & Hx*" is what the speaker intends to communicate.

According to the implicit approach there is no need to express a completion explicitly, given that speakers normally understand the incomplete definite description while sharing the presuppositions given by the conversational context (among which there is a restricted domain of quantification). What – in the explicit approach – is given by a completing property is here given by the context. We might summarize the implicit approach as follows:

(IA) in Context C: [the x: Fx] Gx

Leaving to a later paragraph the development of my proposal, which is more similar to an implicit approach, I will discuss here the advantages and shortcomings of the explicit approach. One of the best defences of the explicit approach is based on the increasingly widespread idea of using incomplete logical forms, or schemata, templates, blueprints (similar views have been proposed in different ways by Recanati (2001) Bach (2004b), Neale (2004), Soames (2008) and others. Buchanan and Ostertag (2005) follow this track; developing an idea of Blackburn (1988), they remark that in using an incomplete DD a speaker – if questioned about his communicative intentions – may give different responses expressing several propositions he *almost* or *nearly* meant. In their example, saying "the guy is late" a speaker may offer many different descriptions of the guy in question ("the guy we are waiting for", "the author of so and so", and so on). Buchanan and Ostertag's main point is that, given that there is no *single* proposition the speaker intends to convey, and the context does not provide a specific one among the many possible propositions which could be accepted as explication, we should still express something *determinate* that the speaker wants to convey through her "sloppy meaning intentions": if a speaker means something "sloppily", she intends to induce any one of a number of responses in the hearer "without regard to which particular one of those responses is produced" (Buchanan and Ostertag 2005, 903).[3] Therefore a proper version of (EA) should rely on a propositional template or blueprint, where no specific completion property is indicated, but any acceptable one can fill the empty slot:

(EA*) [the x: Fx & $\_x$] Gx

This proposal is based on a *broadly* Gricean point of view (the communicated proposition is not stated, but implicated); however, contrary to Grice, there is no proper literal proposition which is "said", because a template is not evaluable as true or false. The solution – the authors claim – relies on an understanding of the linguistic meaning of the sentence-type, and on mutual knowledge of the relevant

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3   This kind of proposal claims that no proposition is expressed, but many possible propositions are derivable. The idea of having many propositions in a single context is developed in a different way in the framework of the "multi-propositionalism" of Korta-Perry (2008). Following Perry's ideas, an utterance is considered as having systematically a variety of contents (sets of truth-conditions) with varying degrees of reflexivity that are relevant to explain issues of cognitive motivation and impact of utterances. The difference from Buchanan and Ostertag is that Korta and Perry do not claim that *no* proposition is *expressed,* but that *more than one* proposition is *expressed* (depending on the goals of speakers and hearers). While not rejecting multipropositionalism, the attention of this paper is on the "official" content or "referential" content, that is the traditional truth conditional content of an assertion.

contextual facts. If this solution works, it would be an answer to Shiffer's criticism of a Russellian treatment of incomplete definite descriptions. Shiffer 2005 shows the difficulties of a Russellian analysis of incomplete descriptions, but his criticism does not take into account this new form of Russell-like analysis developed with template solutions.

However, it seems to me that there is a blind spot which the template approach cannot overcome; in fact the solution seems unable to explain the referential uses of *mis*descriptions like "her husband is kind to her" (but he is actually her lover), "Smith's murderer is insane" (but he is actually innocent), "the man drinking champagne over there" (but he is actually drinking sparkling water). Assuming that these misdescriptions too are "essentially incomplete", we would need a completing property, according to the template solution. However, in cases of misdescriptions, where the property under consideration does not properly fit the individual object (or person) referred to – Buchanan's rendering of the definite description "[the *x*: *Fx* & _*x*] *Gx*" will interpret the sentence as false for *any* completing property, because the first part of the template, "*Fx*", yields a property which does not fit the intended referent. This solution therefore cannot answer the problem raised by Donnellan (1966), according to whom we have to explain how it may happen that we say something true, even in case of misdescription. Taking the example of a person saying "her husband is kind to her" mistakenly referring to a spinster's lover, Donnellan comments that "there is no reason to suppose that he (the speaker) has not said something true or false about him (the lover), even though he is not the lady's husband" (1966, 257).

My first conclusion then is that Buchanan's solution, devised to solve the problem of incomplete descriptions, is unable to deal with *mis*descriptions. We cannot make any use of this template solution to justify referential uses of *mis*descriptions: as in the standard Russell perspective they just all become false, and the fact that they usually work in communication remains a mystery. If we want to defend a unificationist stance which claims that definite descriptions are better represented as incomplete symbols in disguise, then we need to solve the problem of the proper treatment of incomplete *mis*descriptions.[4]

3. Devitt, Almog and misdescriptions

A possible alternative to the unificationist solution is the "ambiguity stance",

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4   A "unificationist" attempt to solve this problem is provided by Soames (2008), who tries to explain how we can have referential uses of misdescriptions which say something true. According to Soames the literal interpretation of a misdescription as "the man drinking champagne is a famous philosopher" (while he drinks mineral water) entails an enriched proposition as (1) [the *x*: *x* is a man &… & *x* = *m*] *x* is a famous philosopher. (1) entails (2) *m* is a famous philosopher. This last proposition is true (provided that *m* is a famous philosopher), and Soames concludes that we may say something true although our assertion is literally false, and "the fact that the speaker has, strictly speaking, asserted one or more falsehoods will matter less than his having asserted an important truth." In doing so, Soames succeeds also in deriving a singular true proposition from a general proposition, a derivation that was the most difficult challenge posed to the unificationists by Devitt. However the solution has some disadvantages: it multiplies propositions beyond necessity and asks us to rely on a mysterious way in which the "intended denotation" of a misdescription enters the picture: there is no clue as to how we get the intended "*m*", but rather a postulation.

according to which definite descriptions have an ambiguous status between a quantificational reading and a (directly) referential reading. An explanation of the referential reading therefore becomes prominent in the debate. One of the main arguments for the ambiguity theory is Devitt's claim that there are standard uses of referential descriptions where the hearer *directly* grasps who the referent is – without the need to resort to an implicature, as is typically claimed on the side of unificationists.[5] The reason behind this is the following: it is not simply that we *can* use a description referentially, but that we *regularly do* so; this regularity is strong evidence that there is a *convention* of using 'the F' to express a thought about a particular object (Devitt 2004, 283). Besides, referential descriptions behave like complex demonstratives, and what counts is the causal link to the object referred to. When I say "the table is covered with books" the description "the table" is – like "that table" – referential "and so it does not depend for its reference on a unique description, but rather on a perceptual causal link." Referential descriptions, that is descriptions whose meaning is contributed directly by the referent, are the best explanation of referential uses of description and may explain the use of incomplete descriptions.

However, Devitt assumes a very cautious attitude towards the case of misdescriptions. Let us again consider the remark "her husband is kind to her" said with reference to the lover of a spinster. Even if "her husband" is a clear case of referential use, we have here a case – according to Devitt – where the truth or falsity of the remark depends on the speaker having in mind somebody who has the property of being a husband. Hence, even if truth conditions are unaffected by ignorance and error in case of incomplete descriptions, a referential use of definite descriptions must guarantee that "the object in mind" has the property given in the description (Devitt 2004, 302). Donnellan's intuition is therefore partly rejected and difficult to explain.[6]

A somewhat different solution is proposed by Almog (2004, forthcoming), who shares with Devitt the idea of referential descriptions generating singular propositions, but with a particular novelty: according to Almog referential descriptions behave like logically proper names; therefore there seems to be no problem in also using misdescriptions to refer to the object we have in mind. The point is that, in referential uses, definite descriptions have the function of expressing a singular thought about an object, which depends on the perceptual cognitive link which *antecedes* the linguistic means I may use to refer to the object. What counts then is the causal cognitive chain – a brute worldly fact – which connects the referent to the speaker. This strategy is centred on the role of the fixation of the reference *from* the object *to* the mind. Once the object is fixed, I intend to communicate by some conventional

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5   It is to be noted however that Neale & Ludlow (2006) express doubts about the use of Gricean implicatures: they claim that the typical derivation using Grice's schema is at most an *ex post facto* justification, and does not provide an explanation of how or why a hearer infers what the speaker intends to communicate.

6   Devitt 2004 (footnote 25) attempts to recover Donnellan's intuition saying that there is a tension arising from the speaker having done something right and something wrong; the tension should dissolve saying "the *F* is causally grounded in an object that *F* does not apply to". It is not clear however which is the referent of "the *F*" in Devitt's proposal; for, being causally grounded in an object that *F* does not apply to, the *F* cannot be the husband, because there is no causal link with the husband; and it cannot be the lover, because the truth conditions of the sentence are linked to the object being an *F*.

means, and I may use either an indexical or a proper name or some predicative information useful for the hearer's understanding – and even a misdescription can be used to perform this expressive function.

Almog (forthcoming) insists on separating two problems: the problem of "who is spoken of" and the problem of "why certain predicates are used to communicate about her". However, giving more attention to the first than to the second problem, Almog runs the risk of missing the central role of the *descriptive* part of the *mis*descriptions; but the role of the descriptive part of a misdescription will be, in my treatment, the key to make Russell's theory compatible with the referential uses of misdescriptions. Following Bach (2004a), we should start with the fact that, even in a misdescription, the descriptive part helps in identifying the referent in at least two ways (i) the *hearer* may think the object fits the description, or (ii) the hearer may think that the *speaker* believes so. There must be some unique thing that has – *or is believed to have* – the property F and that the speaker intends to refer to.[7]

The provisional conclusion of this is the following: for a proper use of a referential definite description it is not enough for the speaker to be in a causal perceptual link to some object; it is necessary to provide the hearer with the means to guide him or her to the intended referent using the descriptive part of the definite description. How might we better define the cognitive access to the object given through an incomplete definite (mis)description? We turn now to this point.

4. Justifying descriptions: an epistemic approach

If we want to avoid the blind-spot of the treatment of misdescription in the template solutions (§2) and overcome the shortcomings of alternative approaches to referential descriptions which do not sufficiently take into account the predicate used in the descriptive part (§3), we need what I call an "epistemic normative approach" to definite descriptions. This approach will give definite descriptions their intended interpretation as incomplete symbols following Russell, while allowing an answer to Donnellan's intuitions.

The first step of my strategy is to support the claim that, even in referential uses of a description, the descriptive part has a fundamental role as "default attribution". Referential uses of definite descriptions are an alternative to indexicals and proper names even in *praesentia* of the intended object, mainly in case of: (i) ambiguity of the scene where an indexical or demonstrative is not enough, (ii) ignorance of the proper name by the audience or speaker, (iii) rules of politeness when the use of a

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7   Bach (2007) claims that the speaker does not use "the F" as elliptical for "the F I have in mind"; more specifically he must expect the hearer to *have cognitive access to the object*. What does Bach mean by cognitive access? Bach (2007, 40) speaks of triangulation; but speaking of triangulation here seems to me to restate in different jargon the need – as insisted on by Devitt and Almog – of sharing the same causal chain. I think this is true, but it is not enough to defend a unificationist stance; the sharing of the causal chain is not enough to define a "cognitive" path, and it is only its possible premise; we need to rely on the role of the predicate used in the description, to differentiate it from other means like demonstratives and indexicals.

demonstrative is not appropriate or the name is too confidential. Given this setting, we may assume that in a normal conversation we use a "default requirement":

> (DR) the property used in a definite description to identify an individual in a scene or situation is a *default* property, a "likelihood" property, or a very probable property given the situation.

Speaking of default[8] or "likelihood", we stress the need, for any suitable use of DD, of a link with relevant information in the wide context and the lexicon used, such that the audience uses the content of the description as a cognitive path to *render* the object referred to salient in the context. If somebody says "the table is covered with books" in a hall full of tables covered with books, without any clue as to which table is relevant, he does not express any semantically evaluable proposition, and he does *not* express "the proposition he has in mind", that is the one concerning the table he is referring to in his solipsistic privacy. The speaker would be excluded from the linguistic community because he demands too much effort of imagination on the part of the hearer, going far beyond what is required by a general equilibrium of cognitive effort.[9] There is a social obligation that the proposition a speaker has in mind must be coherent with the proposition which is accessible to the audience. How? A principle of charity will help, that is introducing a normative and epistemic element into the overall picture of using or interpreting definite descriptions: we may identify what is said with the help of a definite description of what a speaker *should* say given certain contextual restrictions (such as limited information), maximizing the rationality of speaker and hearer.

A second step in my argument is to better define the role of the inferential part of the lexicon in helping the hearer to identify the intended reference. It is easy to see that a characteristic of the default restriction is that, in case of a "literally false" definite description, there are always *some* elements that are rationally usable by a speaker for identification. Let us again take the example of "her husband is kind to her" said referring to a spinster's lover. How can a hearer interpret the sentence, given the situation in which a man is being kind to the only woman in the scene? Here we need to rely on the default requirement (DR): "husband" has some default properties among which are: to be officially married, to have some intimacy with the partner and so on. Given limited information, a speaker may use the term "husband" without proper knowledge of marital status, but relying on the typical properties which are embedded in the inferential net of the relevant fragment of a semantic network (like "if x is y's husband then x takes care of y" or "if x is an y's husband then x behaves intimately with y").[10] Briefly, in identifying the relevant

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8   There is some similarity between my approach and that of Jaszczolt (2002) when she speaks of "default semantics" as giving an underspecified sense that comes before semantic interpretation (247ss). However, the details of Jaszczolt (2005) on definite descriptions give a general strategy for privileging referential descriptions as given by merged representations, where there is not enough consideration for the specific inferential role of the predicate.

9   I am referring to the requirements imposed by relevance theorists (Sperber-Wilson), without the need to accept every detail of their theory.

10   I mean here to refer to the stereotype of "husband", of what a husband should be, more than on the actual behaviour. Certainly husbands are often ugly and unfair; but people get married because they still believe that husbands have certain duties (among which behaving with a loving attitude to wives). Is all this embedded in the lexicon? I refer here to the traditional setting of treating concepts like frames or scripts, which is something with a rich environment of typical inferential relations. Partly following Bach's idea of a first "normal" meaning, and *then* a "stereotypical" meaning

person in the scene the speaker should use the inferential aspects of the lexicon provided by the descriptive part of the definite description plus the information given by the scene or the situation. The hearer may, in this way, reconstruct the *cognitive path* that led the speaker to use that particular definite description in that context.[11]

We may conclude that the inferential surrounding of a lexical term used in a definite *mis*description is always relevant, by default, to providea proper cognitive path needed to give the intended referent. We may call this the *epistemic normative stance*:

> (ENS) the intended reference must not only be coherent with the shared presuppositions, but also with shared knowledge of language, i.e. with inferential default information attached to the relevant lexical items. The intended referent is the individual to whom we are *justified* – in normal conditions and given our limited knowledge – to attribute the property expressed, given that some of the collateral properties associated to the lexical item are activated. Therefore the intended reference is what *should* be understood from what is said in the context.

From this we define – as the third step of our strategy – what can be called the linguistic meaning or "character" of a definite description, in analogy with the idea of character as a function from context to content:[12] the linguistic meaning of a definite description can be defined as

> (C) The unique individual which a speaker in a context – given basic default justifications – should be referring to by the use of the descriptive predicate.

Given (ENS) and the definition (C) of the character of definite descriptions, we may now understand why I have defined this stance as "epistemic" and "normative". It is *epistemic* because it involves justification and it is *normative* because it deals not with actual psychological processes, but with what should be considered as a default justification given our limited knowledge of a situation.

I assume that – when needed – a lexical element is by default connected with its immediate inferential surroundings, its stereotypical frame (the set of inferences "nearer" to the lexical item; a simplification might be reasoning in the context of a semantic network system like KLONE kinds).

11   When the speaker or the hearer come to know that the woman is unmarried, they may still use the definite description as a rigidifying definite description as in ("her husband is, in fact, the lover") or referring to the definite description as a part of a wrong belief (as in "the one you believe to be her husband is her lover"). In any case, all dialogues testify that the misdescription has been correctly understood as intended to identify the intended referent, through our default restriction (DR). Two possible replies are described by Kripke (1975) to update the mistaken belief of the speaker who said "her husband is kind to her": (1) "No, he isn't. The man you are referring to isn't her husband" (2) He is kind to her, but he isn't the husband". According to Kripke, the first reply identifies the semantic reference while the second the speaker's referent. However, both show that the hearer understands which individual has been referred to by the speaker by means of the definite description.

12   Almog (2004, 414 ff) proposes a treatment of definite descriptions as contextuals relying basically on the causal perceptual chain. The main difference from his proposal is the central role given her to the broader concept of justification, which relies heavily of the content of the predicative part of the description. Sainsbury (2004, 380) hints at a similar suggestion for the referential use of definite description in the form of an axiom. However, in doing so, he allows no space for a strategy that permits a unified treatment of attributive and referential uses, and then he derives from the axiom a consequence of semantic ambiguity.

The fourth step of my strategy is to present a picture of how these elements may fit the format of a *general proposition* according to the unificationist's desires. I am suggesting that the meaning of a DD – that is the linguistic rule which permits us to derive the content given a context – must be constrained by some normative epistemic procedure. It is not enough to speak – as Buchanan-Ostertag (2005) do – of "sloppy intentions", but we should attempt to devise the procedures through which those sloppy intentions can actually be communicated to the hearer. Instead of having a propositional template with an empty space, we will have a different structure, which assumes the above definition of the meaning of a definite description with the following format:

in C_i: [the x: $\Delta\ Fx$] Gx

Here [the x: $\Delta\ Fx$] means "the individual having the property F by default justification in the context". While vindicating Donnellan's original intuitions (the speaker is saying something true), this format vindicates a quantificational and Russellian treatment of referential definite descriptions.[13] A misdescription will come out true *by default*, which means – if the description is "well done" – it will succeed in getting the intended reference, although it would always be liable to be falsified (and this is what happens for most of our assertions). To follow our example: "her husband", said by a speaker in the context, is interpreted as referring to the individual whom the speaker is justified to believe to be the husband. Our problem is then to define how this justification can be given; to do that we need to re-define our notion of context and to better define the "Δ", which stands for the justification procedure.

5. A procedural approach to the notion of context

According to Neale & Ludlow (2006, 829) there is no hope of resolution of the debate on a Russellian analysis of referential uses of descriptions without some progress in defining context, anaphora and other related issues. Although some aspects of my proposal could find a reasonable place inside the standard (Kaplanian) semantic setting,[14] I will present my ideas within a different tradition developed in symbolic artificial intelligence, mainly in contextual reasoning.[15] Contextual

13 Neale's idea to treat referential uses of DD as Gödelians like *Ex* (*Fx.x=a.Gx*) does not work properly, unless interpreted as a referential description in Devitt's sense. Where does "*a*" come from? If it is just what the speaker has in mind, and we have no clue to give to the hearer to identify it. But if we use ι(x) $\Delta\ F(x)$, here Δ is a procedure which does not indicate just "what the speaker has in mind", but what the speaker *should* have in mind, given the general presuppositions (if this does not work, it means that the speaker is not successful in communicating).

14 An attempt within the Kaplanian setting can be found in Predelli (2000), who works on the parameters of the circumstance of evaluation as a way to provide the intended content (anticipating the contemporary discussion on relativism based on the different interpretations provided by the context of utterance and the circumstances of evaluation). In the case of "her husband is kind to her" (and similar cases) the possible world in which the definite description is evaluated is not the same as the possible world of the context of utterance (where there may be no husband, or the husband may be different from the intended referent). Briefly we might identify the possible world of the circumstance of evaluation as the possible world of the *narration* intended by the person uttering that particular sentence. The possible world of the narration of the speaker in the above mentioned case is a possible world where the husband is identical to the relevant man in the scene.

15 Perry 1998 and McCarthy 1999 represent responses to Van Benthem's request to specify their visions of context.

reasoning is relevant in our case given that it works with the network of inferences and rules of inference – and inferential competence is a fundamental aspect of lexical competence.[16] I will not offer any formalised setting, but just some general intuitions, using a picture of wide context or situation as a setting where an assertion is made under a set of parameters.

Lewis, discussing the concept of context envisaged by Kaplan, pointed out that an index can be constituted not only of <speaker, time, location> but of *anything that can switch*. What does it mean to put *anything that can switch* into our definition of index? Following Lewis, we may look for a wider set of contextual parameters, but we run the risk of ending up with an endless list, and rendering the definition intractable. We need therefore to find some way to group the parameters, that is to give some classification of the different ways the context of utterance may constrain the interpretation of a sentence.[17] Taking a suggestion from Bouquet (2000), Guha–McCarthy (2003) and Author (2005), I will use three categories to provide a hierarchy among parameters:

(i) partiality
(ii) perspective (or viewpoint)
(iii) approximation.

These three kinds of parameters map the three classical cases of incompleteness for definite descriptions described in §1 of this essay: (i) partiality deals mainly with *domain* restriction and the language used; *time* and *location* are the first parameters used to restrict the domain, but we may need more specific information to make the domain restriction more precise; (ii) perspective, or viewpoint, deals with demonstratives, indexicals and with speaker's and hearer's presuppositions or beliefs; (iii) approximation deals with the level of granularity or the scale used (if I am dealing with tables I don't normally care about subatomic particles, but if I'm dealing with atoms I do). We might think that this last parameter is just an entry for the definition of the domain; however, its pervasive role in treating vagueness gives it such a central role that it seems appropriate to accord it a proper space (we might call it a "sharpening" parameter, as in many treatments of vague predicates).

Are these the only relevant *kinds* of parameters? Do people really use them? Certainly the classification is a rational reconstruction of how speakers would answer if challenged to justify their use of definite descriptions. Perhaps we might find other more suitable classifications; however the main point is that we need an

McCarthy's conception is more similar to a cognitive content (or set of beliefs, or common ground), but this is compatible with the general treatment of context defined by parameters, plus a set of beliefs (axioms), a language and accepted inference rules. I don't want to work on the difference between the standard philosophical approach and the computer science approach (for such a comparison see for instance Author 1999). I am interested here just in the possibility of using a treatment of context which is free of strict links with the standard semantic treatment given by Kaplan. The metaphor of a context as a box is used by Bouquet *et alia* 2000, and I will use it freely as a tool for simplifying the expository aspect.

16 See Marconi 1997.

17 Among the attempts to give such a classification, Recanati 2004a distinguishes obligatory and derogatory cases; his classification, however, does not refer, strictly speaking, to contextual parameters, but to kinds of pragmatic attitudes like enrichment, loosening and transfer, which *depend* on contextual parameters. My point is that we need a general framework to define which kinds of parameters are needed to trigger these pragmatic attitudes.

order of parameters to give an idea of how to *compute* the content of an assertion and its semantic value.

Let a context be represented as a box in which we have assertions whose interpretation depends on the three sets of parameters outside the box. The parameters may shift, depending on which context is taken into consideration. For instance, if the parameter "speaker" in the viewpoint is activated as "Carlo", inside the box we might have "I am tired"; but if we change context, we may express a proposition with the same truth conditions saying: "Carlo is tired". If the parameter "time" in the domain restriction is fixed to "December 25", inside the box we may have "today is a nice day", but, if we change context, we may also have the time expressed inside the box as "On December 25 it is a nice day".

With this in mind, we may better define our "Δ" operator given in the previous paragraph. "Δ" may be interpreted as a procedure[18] for extracting parameters from the context, by running through the three dimensions. The "Δ" procedure should extract the parameters needed to get the most plausible default interpretation of the content of an assertion. Applied to a definite description, the procedure should work according to the epistemic normative stance (ENS). Given our definition of the "character" of definite descriptions, the "Δ" is a procedure which connects the property used to refer to a unique individual (given by the definite article) with the parameters which help to fix that unique individual. The starting point of our procedure is then the intersection of the descriptive predicate and its surrounding inferential environment, with information from the wide context that restricts the possible interpretations.

I'll try here to give a picture of what it means to "activate" the "Δ" factor: let a box be connected with the three kinds of parameters (p = partiality, v = viewpoint, a = approximation) and let a procedure run through the three different parameters until a reasonable default solution is reached.

p, v, a

Her husband is kind to her.

A competent hearer, sharing a basic mastery of contextual parameters, may be represented as if he were applying them one after the other to arrive at "what is said" by the speaker, according to a procedure of the kind:

1) Parameter partiality (restricting the domain):

"the *F*" = "there is an *x* which is the only *x* in the restricted domain which is an *F*"

(if not clear skip to 2)

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18 Generally speaking the procedural aspect of our proposal is part of the architecture of the performance system, and it belongs to pragmatics in performing the role of filtering semantic interpretation. A more traditional procedural aspect of meaning can be found in the role given to the inferential connections of the lexicon. Even if it has no direct link with other paradigms, it may be connected with the spirit of the procedural semantic analysis as given in Jespersen 2005, who presents a logical treatment of referential definite descriptions such as "Smith's murderer".

2) Parameter viewpoint or perspective (situating the predicate epistemically and normatively):

"the *F*" = "there is an *x* which the speaker *is justified to believe* is an *F*"

(if not clear skip to 3)

3) Parameter approximation (specializing step 1 or 2):

"the *F*" = "there is an x which the speaker is justified to believe is an *F* given a lower level of approximation"

[given by lexical (inferential) information conveyed by the linguistic expression and basic information supposed to be shared by the speakers]

In step 1) we cannot reach a conclusion because, assuming that the scene contains more than one man, the restricted domain of quantification does not suffice to isolate an individual; in step 2) – unless it were a shared presupposition – we may think we are not justified to believe the individual is an husband, lacking explicit evidence of the fact; in 3) we may relax the precision with which we attribute a property, and be content with the inferential surrounding of the lexical item.[19]

The definition of the meaning of definite descriptions as a function from context to content may help to give a unified treatment of attributive and referential use. In cases of attributive uses of definite descriptions, the default procedure stops at the first step, of the domain restriction; for instance, "the present King of France" stops with a falsity if the domain is the one including present-day kings (unless some further refinement is given if the sentence is used as a metaphor or in historical narration). Or "her husband is kind to her" is false if the intended domain is the domain of "legal" husbands. In referential uses the domain is restricted to objects with which the speaker entertains a direct epistemic relation (a perceptual or causal link). In saying that most definite descriptions are context dependent, we also mean that we have to filter *at least* the domain of interpretation.

What, then, is the logical form of a definite description? Shall we follow an explicit or an implicit approach? This contraposition in our case does not work properly. In fact, on the one hand, in always leaving room for the context, we are assuming a kind of implicit approach; on the other hand, in inserting a symbol for a procedure associated with the logical form it seems that we are nearer to the explicit approach. The difference between the standard explicit approach and our approach is that in the former the symbol "H" stands for a completing property, while in the latter the "Δ" is not a symbol for a property, but a symbol for a procedure, which should run through contextual parameters. To present it in the form of a slogan, I should say that we have a pragmatically filtered semantic interpretation: what is semantically

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19 The strategy so defined for restricting intended interpretations apparently is not linked just to definite descriptions, but may have a wide range of cases, with different steps; for instance we may stop at level 1) in the typical cases of local domains like "all dogs are barking", while we need to go to step 2) for cases like "I have nothing to wear", or to go to step 3) in cases like "the ham sandwich went away without paying". We may therefore see that the kind of general strategy could be a way to treat typical situations of free enrichment or loosening.

expressed by a misdescription is true, under pragmatic or epistemic restrictions.

Giving a very brief comparison with other ideas in contemporary debate, this proposal could be expressed by saying that I extend what minimalists would call "the basic set", which they see as limited to indexicals, to definite descriptions.[20] Given that the "Δ" procedure is considered as a proper part of the logical form of a definite description, it might seem that its role is similar to what would be a hidden articulate constituent for indexicalists;[21] but it is not exactly so; in fact the "Δ" is not a place for a bound variable in the syntax, but a place for a procedure which uses the lexicon to activate different kinds of parameters when needed, until it reaches a stop. Another similarity might be found between our "Δ" procedure with the "counts as" of relativists;[22] however idea of "counts as" requires a split between the context of utterance and the circumstances of evaluation, while the procedure I am considering works directly on the context of utterance.

From a more general philosophical point of view this proposal sounds not too dissimilar from the Davidsonian picture of conversation as convergence between two passing theories (speaker and hearer rely on their knowledge of the lexicon plus the situation), but supplemented with a strategy guided by pragmatic rules of partiality, perspective and approximation (Author 200X). Davidson (1986) was speaking of the "mystery" of the strategy by which we converge towards the same meanings. There is no mystery: the rich inferential structure of the lexicon gives inputs for activating procedures which run through kinds of contextual parameters to provide cognitive access to the intended referent and to what the speaker says and means. In this way we may vindicate both Donnellan's and Russell's intuitions, and avoid the "ambiguity thesis". In fact "her husband is kind to her" can be considered as shorthand for a more boring "the person the speaker rationally believes to be her husband – given the evidence in the lexicon and in the situation which justifies by default this property – is kind to her". And this is an expression of a true proposition.

6. Post-script: challenges and answers

In this paper I have suggested a procedural setting in which to define pragmatic rules for filtering semantic interpretation. The idea has been prompted by some dissatisfaction with many treatments of misdescriptions which seemed to me unable to answer the old challenge by Donnellan: how can we say something true even with an apparently false definite description?

As we saw in §2, Buchanan and Ostertag make it impossible to explain the success of misdescriptions in communicating something true because their rendering of the template solution makes all misdescriptions false under any interpretation. Though

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20 See Cappelen and Lepore 2005; the step is not so awkward given that personal pronouns, which belong to indexicals, are typically considered in linguistics as abbreviated definite descriptions (cfr. Neale 2005)
21 See Stanley 2005
22 See McFarlane 2007, 2009

I maintain the idea of a treating incomplete definite descriptions with some kind of "sloppy intention", instead of a "template" solution I use the standard Russellian logical form connected with a procedure and I take definite descriptions as functions from context to content; using definite descriptions as contextuals, my epistemic-normative treatment explains how a misdescription can be used to say something true in the context of utterance, given that – typically – a misdescription is apt to make speaker and hearer converge on the intended referent, given the context.

As we saw in §3, Josep Almog tries to explain how we can use a misdescription to say something true, relying of our use of referential descriptions; however in doing so he runs the risk of completely cutting off the role of the descriptive part of the description, making the referential success in communication a mystery. On the contrary, in my account, I give a proper role also to the descriptive part, considering the role of the inferential aspects of the lexicon in giving default justifications for use of the lexical item in the context. In this way I succeed in explaining the success of the referential uses of misdescriptions, and at the same time give a unified treatment of definite descriptions, covering cases of both attributive and referential uses.

However my proposal has to face at least two objections: (i) it leaves the boundary between semantic and pragmatics unclear; (ii) it deals with psychology (cognition) and not with semantics. In the following I will offer some responses to these two challenges.

(i) Does my treatment overlap semantic and pragmatic issues, without a clear identification of the boundaries between semantics and pragmatics? This is "the" as yet unresolved issue in the debate on the boundary betweens semantics and pragmatics.[23] Like many others, I reject the traditional idea according to which pragmatics enters *after* the definition of semantic content, with a qualification. The idea of filling the gaps of an incomplete description by means of a procedural operator which runs through the contextual parameters contains the claim that pragmatics should *filter* the semantic interpretation, and give the conditions for a correct compositionality. The result of a procedure of the kind I have proposed has nothing to do with an implicature, but gives the truth conditional content of what is said by means of a sentence *in* a context. Sentences alone don't say anything, and their truth condition depends on the objects the sentence uttered in a context refers to. A semantic theory must capture the truth conditions of the things asserted, which are the things a hearer believes when he understands an assertion; this amounts to accepting that "whoever fully understands a declarative utterance knows which state of affairs would possibly constitute a truth maker for that utterance" (Recanati 2004, 49).

Given the assertion "her husband is kind to her", what are the things asserted? Which state of affairs would possibly constitute a truth maker for that utterance? Only in a context does a sentence refer to some individual and the truth conditions of "her husband is kind to her" should be read as such:

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23 See Bianchi 2004, Szabó 2005.

> TC: "her husband is kind to her" is true in context C *iff* the individual denoted by "her husband" in the context is kind to the individual denoted by "her" in the context.

Given our limited knowledge, the intended referent is the individual who has the best chance of being described as such in the situation. We need to select the right individual in order to check the validity of further reasoning in the discourse, keeping track of anaphoric links. If we miss these links we miss the intended referent. It is too easy to say that the lady is a spinster and therefore the speaker refers to nobody; how then are we to understand what might follow in the conversation? Philosophers have often used linguistic examples, isolating them from a discourse. But discourse is what permits us to keep track of the referents through anaphoric chains and check our previous guesswork on who the intended referent might be. In our semantic interpretation we need to identify the individual actually referred to by a definite description in context, and not a possible individual "stipulated" to be the metaphysical entity referred to. In using natural language we always engage in guesswork[24] and therefore we are always liable to fail: we need to express our ability to understand what we say, keeping in mind the essential condition of uncertainty linked to language use.

Donnellan's case is in fact the case of *most of* our descriptions: as most of our descriptions are "essentially incomplete", they are often literally wrong under requirements for more precise and detailed justifications, or are at least liable to be either revisable or further specifiable. Unless we want to impose upon the semantics of natural language a metaphysical commitment beyond the epistemic capability of humans, we have to understand truth conditions as something we can obtain through language and context, with the typical default structure we constantly use in expressing our thoughts about individuals. Definite descriptions (both in referential and attributive uses), whose role is to refer to individuals, will almost always be approximated, and in need of contextual specification. Semantic interpretation does not come before pragmatic interpretation, but typically begins after we have decided the referents of our expressions (in a more traditional setting: after we have filled the index with values); this is the result of treating the semantics of natural language as dealing with how language is used, not with an unattainable metaphysical reality.

The ENS stance should give the default *semantic* content. This attitude is in tune with Recanati's availability principle, according to which what is said "must be available, must be open to view" (see Recanati 2004, 49). However, the default semantic interpretation does not amount to "intuitive truth conditions" or "pragmatic

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24 I take from Frege the slogan of the necessity of "guesswork" in understanding natural language. Actually any guess may be revealed to be wrong, but can be easily accommodated. The fact that the individual described as "the husband" is not a husband is *further* information, which makes the description literally wrong, and requires a revision of the lexicon used, without missing the right link to the intended referent introduced by the reference fixing description (based on default information). But we may *always* have further information: for instance, we might be informed that the man we believed to be the husband is the lover; but later also that the man we believed to be the lover of the lady is actually the real husband in disguise, and so on. Semantics cannot deal with any possible revision; we have to rely on the basic core of the default use of our lexicon in normal situations, considering the essential condition of fallibility of any description. What counts is the ability to use the lexicon to render the correct referent salient in the context.

truth conditions", but to "*pragmatically filtered semantic truth conditions*":[25] the procedure relies on objective facts of the situation and of the lexicon, and makes these facts interact to give the most plausible candidate for being the referent of our expressions. The filtering aims to give the default intended referent; once the referent is given, then we may check all other aspects of the sentence in discourse, such as anaphora and compositionality. Speaking of "default" truth conditions I am stressing the claim that the contextual filtering of truth conditions cannot be a deterministic procedure: context does not *determine* what is said, but it *constrains* what speakers could reasonable say and hearers should reasonably understand.[26]

(ii) Given that I am concerned with the problem of understanding, somebody might say that my attempt does not regard semantics, but is an attempt to give a psychological or cognitive explanation of the mental processes going on in communication. Recently Kent Bach discussed the ambiguity of the term "utterance interpretation", as something in between a semantic interpretation (the mapping of sentence forms into linguistic meanings) and psychological processes (how listeners figure out what speakers are trying to communicate). There is nothing wrong with the latter kind of work; the main disaster occurs, however, when instead of treating the study of understanding as a psychological problem or a cognitive problem of devising the cognitive processes under analysis, people treat it "as if it were something more abstract, more akin to semantic interpretation". I report the quotation in full:

> Some philosophers and linguists treat utterance interpretation […] as if it were a mapping from syntactic structure to utterance contents, except that mapping is sensitive to broadly contextual factors. In doing so they seem to think that an utterance (as opposed to a sentence) can express things independently of what the speaker means in making it, just because of the context in which it is made. It is as if meanings could somehow be read off utterances independently of inferring the speaker's intention, in a way analogous to semantic interpretation of sentences, but without the constraint of being a projection of syntactic structure. (Bach 2004b, 35)

My attempt belongs to the attitude of philosophers, who think of semantics as dealing with the problem of reference, and not only with linguistic meaning. There may be some terminological misunderstanding and some disagreement. If we distinguish truth theoretical semantics and theory of meaning,[27] we maintain the distinction between the truth theoretical apparatus of formal semantics and the analysis of linguistic meaning (which is also called "semantics"). I have tried to give what may be defined as the "meaning" or "character" of definite descriptions as a "default meaning", that is a procedure for extracting information from the lexicon, *plus*

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25 Truth conditional pragmatics concerns elements that are not encoded in the linguistic expression used, but depend on pragmatic maxims (see for instance Carlston 2004, 73). Here the pragmatic procedure I suggest does not depend on pragmatic maxims and does not use implicature, but it is a search for what is encoded in the linguistic expression, considered as a part of the inferential structure of the lexicon used.

26 The idea of pragmatic constraints on semantics is shared by many authors, among whom Bach 2004b, 35; Perry (forthcoming) and Soames (2008). However, the way in which pragmatics performs this job is a question of specification. The idea of the role of pragmatics as "filtering" semantic interpretation is the main proposal of this essay.

27 See Vignolo 2009

information from contextual elements, in order to define how the referents of our expressions are individuated. In doing so, I claim that the procedure gives both what a speaker should say to drive the audience towards the intended referent, and what a hearer should expect the speaker to mean; we cannot avoid connecting what is said with our understanding; but this does not amount necessarily to a study of our mental processes, as is done in psychology or cognitive studies. It is a higher-level abstract representation of the compatibility between what is linguistically expressed and what should be understood in a context. We are totally blind to the hidden intentions of a speaker unless the speaker says something understandable in context using inferences embedded in the lexicon and shared in the local situation.

Decades ago Barbara Hall Partee 1983 contrasted a mathematical semantics with a psychological semantics; I suggest that our theories of meaning can be something in between the two; they are an attempt to give a general framework of the structure of understanding. They are not psychology in disguise, although they must be coherent with psychological data. They must deal with the way we *constrain* semantic interpretation (truth conditions). Phenomena like free enrichment or loosening in this approach may become aspects of a more general treatment of contextual pragmatic filtering, which is a step that comes before semantic interpretation. Isn't this a late legacy of the old Fregean idea that compositionality depends on contextuality?

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