

A Brief Survey of Explanations on Definite Description

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1 Definite Description

Initially described as singular noun phrase with definite determiner

2 Modern Precursors

(My list doesn't begin with Aristotle!)

2.1 Frege (1892), “On sense and reference”

If “whoever discovered the elliptic form of the planetary orbits died in misery” means ‘there was someone who discovered the elliptic form of the planetary orbits and he died in misery’, its negation should mean ‘either whoever discovered the elliptic form of the planetary orbit did not die in misery or there was nobody who discovered the elliptic form of the planetary orbits’, by De Morgan’s laws, which seems to be contradicted by our linguistic intuitions.

So, the argument goes, this sentence was supposed to have no reference if nobody discovered the elliptic form of the planetary orbits.

2.2 Russell (1905), “On denoting”

“The king of France is not bald” could be true or false even without the existence of a king of France. It would be true when meaning ‘it is not the case that there is somebody such that just he is a king of France and he is bald’. And it would be false if it means ‘There is somebody such that just he is a king of France and he is not bald’.

In Russell’s account the definite description introduces an existential quantification which interacts with the negation, resulting in the classical scope ambiguity among operators.

$$\exists x[K(x) \wedge \forall y[K(y) \rightarrow x = y] \wedge B(x)]$$

2.3 Philosophical discussion

- Strawson (1950), “On referring”
- Sellars (1954), “Presupposing”
- Strawson (1954), ?
- Russell (1957), “Mr. Strawson on referring”
- Caton (1959), “Strawson on refereing”
- Donnellan (1966), “Reference and definite description”

term \times quantifier

3 Linguistic turn

- Morgan (1973), *Presupposition and the Representation of Meaning*
- Kempson (1975), *Presupposition and the Delimitation of Semantics*
- Karttunen & Peters (1979), “Conventional implicature”

3.1 Other functions of definite description

- Expression of genericity (“O leão tem quatro patas”)
- Reference to kinds (“O tigre está em extinção”)
- Anaphoric link (“Um automóvel colidiu... o carro...”)

Uses not explained by the Russellian explanation

3.2 Further requirements for a definite description theory

- Definite \times indefinite description: why does the latter introduce a discourse referent while the former can only refer to a previously introduced one?
- Singular \times plural: why does the plural definite description behave differently from a singular one?
- Individual reference \times mass term: what does allow definite descriptions to be used for denotation of individuals and substances? (Sharvy 1980, “A more general theory of definite descriptions”; Ojeda 1993, *Linguistic Individuals*)

- Discourse relevance: “the king of France” introduces a discourse referent (and only one) which has the property of being king of France, the sentence does not introduce kingdom or France — so it is not possible to continue the discourse talking about kingdom or France (Chateaubriand 2001, *Logical Forms*, p. 98)
- Is definiteness a property of linguistic expressions? or does it belong to the things referred by them?

4 Conclusions

- To my knowledge there is no theory that explains all questions mentioned here
- It is not even clear to me whether someone has the hope to manage that unification
- But I think it would be one of the greatest achievements resulting from the efforts of linguists and philosophers

Os piores venenos vêm nos menores frascos

The worse poisons come in the smallest bottles