

Logic and Language

Definite Descriptions

Is Russell's theory of definite descriptions adequate for analysing all definite descriptions in natural language?

Essential Reading

- Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting", *Mind*, New Series, vol. 14 (1905), pp. 479-93
- Keith Donnellan, "Reference and Definite Descriptions", *Philosophical Review*, vol. 75 (1966), pp. 281-304
- Saul Kripke, "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference", in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, volume 2, edited by French and Wettstein (1977), pp. 255-76
- Peter Millian, "Content, Thoughts, and Definite Descriptions", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volume 6 (1990), pp. 167-203, sections 1-4

Additional Reading

- Bertrand Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, London: Allen & Unwin (1919), chapter 16
- P. F. Strawson, "On Referring", *Mind*, New Series, vol. 59 (1950), pp. 320-44
- Bertrand Russell, "Mr Strawson on Referring", *Mind*, New Series, vol. 66 (1957), pp. 385-9
- H. P. Grice, "Presupposition and Conversational Implicature", in his *Studies in the ways of Words*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1989), pp. 269-82
- Stephen Neale, *Descriptions*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (1990), especially chapter 3

Past Paper Questions

- 2000, Q8: How should Russell's theory of descriptions treat sentences like "The door is open"?
- 2002, Q15: Does Russell's theory of definite descriptions give correct necessary and sufficient conditions for an utterance containing a definite description to express a truth?
- 2005, Q9: Is Russell's theory of definite descriptions adequate for analysing all definite descriptions in natural language?
- 2006, Q20: Does "the Chancellor of Oxford University" refer to the Chancellor of Oxford University?
- 2008, Q3: Consider the sentence: "The British Prime Minister is in India." Does this sentence assert or presuppose the existence of the British Prime Minister?
- 2009, Q1: Does the existence of many tables pose a problem for the analysis of the sentence "The table is brown"?
- 2010, Q4: "Since I can refer satisfactorily to an object by using a description that the object does not satisfy, Russell's theory of definite descriptions cannot be right." Discuss.
- 2011, Q11: Do definite descriptions refer?
- 2012, Q14b: What is the logical form of sentences like "The King of France is bald"?
- 2013, Q3: Can advocates of Russell's theory of definite descriptions adequately explain uses of "incomplete" descriptions which are satisfied by many objects?