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Russell’s Theory of Definite Descriptions

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The proper statement and assessment of Russell’s theory depends on one’s semantic presuppositions. A semantic framework is provided, and Russell’s theory formulated in terms of it. Referential uses of descriptions raise familiar problems for the theory, to which there are, at the most general level of abstraction, two possible Russellian responses. Both are considered, and both found wanting. The paper ends with a brief consideration of what the correct positive theory of definite descriptions might be, if it is not the Russellian theory.

The theory of definite descriptions Bertrand Russell presented in ‘On Denoting’ one hundred years ago was instrumental in defining the then newly emerging philosophy of language, but a more remarkable achievement is that this centenarian theory is the currently dominant theory of definite descriptions. But what, exactly, is this theory? The question needs to be asked because the theory Russell presented in 1905 is not acceptable in the form in which he then stated it, and while we have little trouble in deciding whether a theory of definite descriptions is sufficiently like the one Russell formulated to be worth calling Russellian, it happens that what question one thinks a semantic theory of definite descriptions needs to answer will depend on how one thinks certain foundational issues in the theory of meaning need to be resolved. There is no consensus as to how those issues should be resolved. I elaborate on this a little in section 1, and in section 2 propose as a working hypothesis a conception of meaning for which I have argued elsewhere, and in terms of whose architecture a Russellian theory of definite descriptions may be formulated.1 How the theory should be formulated in terms of that architecture is then the topic of section 3. Section 4 confronts my formulation of the Russellian theory with the apparent problem for it implied by certain referential uses of definite descriptions. There are at the most general level of abstraction two possible Russellian responses to this problem, and one of them is the standard Russellian response to the referential-use problem. Section 5 critically discusses that response and argues for its rejection. Section 6

1 Schiffer (2003a), especially Chs 3 and 4.
critically discusses the other possible Russellian response and argues for its rejection, too. The final section, 7, gives a brief summary and discusses what the correct positive theory of definite descriptions might be, if it is not the Russellian theory.

1. The question at issue

In ‘On Denoting’ Russell stated his theory of definite and indefinite descriptions as a theory about the sentences to which sentences containing those expressions were equivalent in meaning. He said that

(1) All humans are mortal

was equivalent in meaning to

(2) ‘If x is human, x is mortal’ is always true,

and, more to the present point, he said that

(3) The father of Charles II was executed

was equivalent in meaning to

(4) It is not always false of x that x begat Charles II and that x was executed and that ‘if y begat Charles II, y is identical with x’ is always true of y.

This was unfortunate, since, for one thing, (1) and (3), unlike (2) and (4), are not about language. Russell, we know, soon appreciated this, and he and Whitehead gave a more perspicuous representation in their monumental Principia Mathematica, according to which, when restated in the current formalism, (3) would be said to be equivalent in meaning not to (4), but rather to

(5) $\exists x(\forall y(Fy \leftrightarrow y = x) \land Ex),$

where the predicate ‘$F$’ is assigned as its extension the set of fathers of Charles II and ‘$E$’ the set of people who were executed. But in what sense of ‘meaning’ might (3) be said to be equivalent in meaning to (5)? Arguably not in at least one sense of meaning nowadays favoured by Grice-influenced philosophers of language, according to which (3) and (5) are equivalent in meaning only if what one would say in uttering (3) is identical to what one would say in uttering (5). If for no other reason, it is implausible that saying that the father of Charles II was executed = saying that $\exists x(\forall y(Fy \leftrightarrow y = x) \land Ex)$ because the truth-conditional semantics assigned to ‘$\exists x(\forall y(Fy \leftrightarrow y = x) \land Ex)$’ in Predicate Logic,
even Modal Predicate Logic, gives no reading to that sentence in intentional contexts like ‘John believes/said that \( \exists x(\forall y(Fy \leftrightarrow y = x) \land Ex) \)’. This problem is avoided if instead of saying that (3) is equivalent in meaning to (5), one were to say that it is equivalent to something like:

(6) There was at least and at most one person who was a father of Charles II, and that person was executed.

The problem with this suggestion lies in its evasive use of ‘something like’: (6) is not equivalent in meaning to, say,

There was at least and at most one person who was a father of Charles II, and every person who was a father of Charles II was executed,

and neither of these meaning-unequivalent sentences makes a better claim to being equivalent in meaning to (3).

Perhaps we should understand Russell’s claim as being that (3) and (5) are the ‘same in meaning’ in the sense that, necessarily, they have the same truth-value: necessarily, (3) is true/false iff (5) is true/false. That is a substantial claim about (3) that Russell would have accepted and which, as regards (3), generates the right debates. Its problem is that it is unclear how it can be the basis for a good general formulation of Russell’s theory of definite descriptions, since it is unclear what formulation is implied for sentences that do not have context-independent truth-values. If the application of Russell’s theory to (3) is the claim that (3) and (5) must have the same truth-value, then what should we take to be its application to, say, (7)?

(7) The dog growls.

One natural extension of the truth-value-equivalence line on (3) would answer that, for any utterance of (7), there is a predicate \( H \) such that, necessarily, that utterance has the same truth-value as

(8) \( \exists x(\forall y((Hy \land Dy) \leftrightarrow y = x) \land Gx) \),

where ‘\( D \)’ is assigned as its extension the set of dogs and ‘\( G \)’ the set of things that growl.\(^2\)

\(^2\)A similar problem of 'incompleteness' also arises for Russell's account of indefinite descriptions (see Neale (1990), sect. 3.7). If we take what Russell wrote in 'On Denoting' at its literal word, then a true utterance of 'There are no clean cups' would come out false. A revision requiring incorporation of a contextually-determined supplementary property would be equally justified, and then equally subject to the problem I raise just below in the text. I return to the question of how the two 'incompleteness' problems are related in my discussion of what I call the standard Russelian response to the problem raised for the theory of descriptions by referential uses of definite descriptions.
And if that is acceptable to Russell, then he could generalize to all sentences of the form ‘The $F$ is $G$’, for he could say that for every utterance of a sentence of that form there is a predicate $H$ such that, necessarily, the utterance has the same truth-value as $\exists x (\forall y ((Hy \land Fy) \leftrightarrow y = x) \land Gx)^1$. When the definite description, like ‘the father of Charles II’, is not ‘incomplete’, $H$ can be read as null (or, what comes to the same, given the same extension as $F$).

This would not be a good generalization. The problem (well, one problem) is that an utterance of any sentence might be non-literal. For example, in uttering (7) you might mean that your scruffy neighbour Seymour growls. In that case, there would be no candidate instance of (8), but that would be no objection to anything worth calling a Russel-lian theory. This suggests that the best reading of Russell’s proposal in ‘On Denoting’ for the simple case of sentences of the form ‘The $F$ is $G$’— which simple case will serve us well enough throughout this paper—is that for every literal utterance of ‘The $F$ is $G$’ there is a predicate $H$ such that, necessarily, the truth-value of that utterance is the same as that of $\exists x (\forall y ((Hy \land Fy) \leftrightarrow y = x) \land Gx)^1$.

Recourse to the notion of a literal utterance brings us to contemporary ways of stating Russell’s theory, and to a methodological criticism of it. Writers on the semantics of definite descriptions sometimes pose the question ‘What is the proposition expressed in, or the semantic content of, a literal utterance of “The $F$ is $G$”?’, and then proceed to offer an answer to that question based in part on the writer’s direct intuitions about what the ‘proposition expressed’ or ‘semantic content’ is. I believe the strategy behind such talk of semantic content or proposition expressed to be basically sound, although it stands in need of precisification. The strategy is basically sound because, as I shall presently propose, the sentence type ‘The $F$ is $G$’ does have something we may call its meaning in a given person’s idiolect, and this meaning determines a relation of fit that may or may not be satisfied by what the person means in uttering the sentence. When the fit obtains, then the utterance counts as ‘literal’ and what the person means in uttering the sentence is the ‘proposition expressed’ or the ‘semantic content’ of that utterance. Then the question to be answered by a theory of definite descriptions is properly taken to be about the proposition expressed, or the semantic content, of an utterance of a sentence containing a definite description. My methodological criticism, which by no means vitiates most of the points made in the litera-

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3 Throughout this paper I often help myself to the expediency of writing as though ‘The $F$ is $G$’ were a sentence and not a sentence form, relying on the context to make clear the proper expansion of what I mean.
ture on definite descriptions, is that we are not in a position reliably to have ‘direct intuitions’ about what is or is not the semantic content of an utterance of such sentences as regards the sorts of cases that challenge anything that is properly called a Russelian theory of definite descriptions. Why this is so will become clear in the next section, and I shall briefly discuss some of its implications in the concluding section.

2. An architecture for answering the question

As always, we need to take certain things as working hypotheses just to get started. One of my working hypotheses, for which I have argued elsewhere,⁴ is that propositional attitudes such as believing and propositional speech acts such as asserting are relations to propositions: abstract, mind- and language-independent entities that have truth conditions and have those truth conditions both essentially and absolutely, without relativization to anything else. This of course leaves plenty of room for theorists to disagree about the further nature of the propositions we believe and assert, and I shall touch on this further question as I proceed. A second working hypothesis, itself motivated by the first hypothesis and for which I have also argued elsewhere,⁵ is that there are entities that can serve as the meanings of expression types in the sense that, roughly speaking, an expression type has meaning just in case it is appropriately related to one of those things, and two expression types have the same meaning just in case they are both appropriately related to the same such thing.⁶ This raises two crucial questions. First, what sort of things are the meanings of expression types? Second, what is the nature of the meaning relation, that relation that must obtain between two things in order for one to be a meaning of the other? Once we have an answer to the first question, it will be clear what question a theory of meaning for definite descriptions must be in the business of trying to answer; and we will be in a better position to answer that question once we have an answer to the second question.

So what sort of entities are expression-type meanings, given that there are such entities? David Kaplan’s well-known and widely-accepted answer is a good starting point.⁷ According to this account, an

⁴ See Schiffer (2003a), especially Chs 1 and 2.
⁵ Schiffer (2003a), Ch. 3.
⁶ For a sense in which there are not such things as the meanings of expression types, see Schiffer (2003a), Ch. 3.
expression type's meaning is to be identified with what Kaplan calls its character, where this is a function that maps 'contexts of utterance' onto 'contents'. Contents for Kaplan are Russellian propositions and their constituents. To a rough first approximation, the content of an indicative sentence token is a Russellian proposition, and the contents of the words in the sentence token either are or else determine the components of that proposition, so that the proposition that is the content of a sentence token is a function of the contents of its component expression tokens. Kaplan's 'contexts' are introduced to accommodate indexicals (roughly, pronouns and demonstratives). If our language were non-indexical (and we ignore tense-induced indexicality), Kaplan would be content to say that the meaning of 'Saul Kripke' is Saul Kripke, that the meaning of 'logician' is the property of being a logian, and that the meaning of 'Saul Kripke is a logician' is the 'singular proposition' <Saul Kripke, the property of being a logician>. It is to accommodate indexical sentences like 'I am not there yet' that Kaplanian 'contexts' are introduced. The intuitive idea is that the Russellian content of an indexical expression token is determined by factors pertaining to the context in which the token is produced, and that the meaning of an indexical expression type is a rule that tells us how contextual factors determine the contents of indexical expression tokens. Accordingly, Kaplan defines his 'contexts' as indices—ordered n-tuples of all the contextual factors needed to determine the contents of expression tokens relative to them. Such indices are taken to include at least a speaker, a hearer, a possible world, a time, and a location, and we can

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8. Russellian propositions are structured entities whose basic components are the objects and properties our beliefs and assertions are about, and they may be represented as ordered pairs of the form <<x₁, ..., xₖ>, Rₙ>, where <x₁, ..., xₖ> is an ordered n-tuple of things of any ontological category and Rₙ is an n-ary relation (unary relations are properties). A typical Russellian might to a first approximation represent the propositions that Fido is a dog, that Fido loves Fi Fi and Fi Fi loves Fido, and that there are tigers as, respectively, <Fido, doghood>, <<<Fido, Fi Fi>, the love relation>, <<Fi Fi, Fido>, the love relation>>, the conjunction relation>, and <<the property of being a tiger, the property of being instantiated>>. For any possible world w, <<x₁, ..., xₖ>, Rₙ> is true in w iff <x₁, ..., xₖ> instantiates Rₙ in w, but there is a debate among proponents of Russellian propositions as to whether the members of <x₁, ..., xₖ> must exist in w in order to instantiate Rₙ in w and a corresponding debate about whether <x₁, ..., xₖ> must exist in w in order for the proposition <<<x₁, ..., xₖ>, Rₙ>> to be false in w, as opposed to neither true nor false. Those who think existence is required will claim that the proposition that Saul Kripke is self-identical is neither true nor false in those worlds in which Kripke does not exist, whereas the other Russelians will claim that the proposition is true in every possible world. This debate will not affect the present discussion.

9. One reason this is a rough first approximation is that the content of a sentence like 'It's raining' is partly determined by references the speaker make in uttering it, where the things referred to (in this case, the place at which it is raining) are not the referents of any expression in the sentence uttered.
then say, for example, that the meaning of ‘I’ is that function which maps every index onto the speaker in it. There is then no problem in also accommodating non-indexical expressions, such as ‘square’ and ‘Saul Kripke’: for these expressions, contextual factors are inoperative and their meanings can be taken to be constant functions that map all indices onto the same content. If one accepts the character account of expression-type meaning, then to ask what kind of characters sentences containing definite descriptions have is to ask about the nature of those propositions that are the contents of sentence tokens containing definite descriptions.

But not even a proponent of Russellian propositions should accept the character account of expression-type meaning without revision. The main problem goes to the heart of the conception of meaning it hopes to make precise—namely, meaning as a rule that tells us how contextual factors determine the semantic values of expression tokens. Meaning-as-character may initially seem plausible when the focus is on a word such as ‘I’, but it loses plausibility when the focus is on other pronouns and demonstratives. What ‘contextual factors’ determine the referent of the pronoun ‘she’ in a context of utterance (its referent is its content for Kaplan)? Evidently, the meaning of ‘she’ (very roughly speaking) merely constrains one uttering it to be referring to a female. We do not even have to say that it constrains the speaker to refer to a contextually salient female, since the speaker cannot intend to refer to a particular female unless he expects his hearer to recognize to which female he is referring, and the expectation of such recognition itself entails that the speaker takes the referent to have an appropriate salience. What fixes the referent of a token of ‘she’ are the speaker’s referential intentions in producing that token, and therefore in order for Kaplan to accommodate ‘she’, he would have to say that a speaker’s referential intentions constitute one more component of those n-tuples that he construes as ‘contexts’.10 The trouble with this is that there is no work for Kaplanian contexts to do once one recognizes speakers’ referential intentions. The referent of a pronoun or demonstrative is always determined by the speaker’s referential intentions. If the speaker who utters ‘I’ does not intend to refer to herself by her utterance of ‘I’—say, if she uttered ‘I picked a peck of pickled peppers’ merely to work on her elocution—then she is not speaking literally and thus her utterance of ‘I’ does not refer to herself or to anything else, since she is not saying anything about herself or anything else. The difference between ‘I’ and

10 This seems to be pretty much what Kaplan (1989) does say, since it is evidently what he intends when he says that his contexts will contain ‘demonstrations’.
'she' is that the meaning of 'I' constrains the literal speaker to be referring to herself, whereas the meaning of 'she' merely constrains the speaker to be referring to a female. Kaplan’s notion of 'context' is superfluous. He would have done better to have said that the character of an expression type is a function that maps possible tokens of the type onto contents. Then he might to a first approximation have said:

The character of 'she' is that function $f$ such that, necessarily, for any token $\tau$ of 'she' and any $x$, $f(\tau) = x$ iff $x$ is the female to whom the speaker refers by his utterance of $\tau$.

The character of 'I' is that function $f$ such that, necessarily, for any token $\tau$ of 'I' and any $x$, $f(\tau) = x$ iff $x =$ the speaker and the speaker refers to himself by his utterance of $\tau$.

(As just noted, the requirement that the speaker be referring to himself by his utterance of 'I' is not superfluous, since if that condition is not satisfied, the utterance of 'I' will not be part of a literal utterance and therefore will not have any reference.)

And if that is a reasonable revision for the Kaplanian to make for the character of 'I', then he should not say that the character of 'Saul Kripke is a logician' is that constant function which maps all 'contexts' onto the proposition that Saul Kripke is a logician, but should say instead something like:

The character of 'Saul Kripke is a logician' is that function $f$ such that, necessarily, for any token $\tau$ of the sentence and any $x$, $f(\tau) = x$ iff $x =$ <Saul Kripke, the property of being a logician> and the speaker means that proposition in his utterance of $\tau$.

Neither Kaplan's original account of character nor the revision I have proposed for it is essentially tied to the construal of contents as Russelian contents. Anyone who thinks that the propositions expressed by sentence tokens are compositionally determined by semantic values of the sentence’s component expression tokens can accept a character account of expression-type meaning, whether or not she thinks propositions are Russelian, or even structured. But I have argued elsewhere that the propositions we assert and believe are not compositionally determined in that way, and on my way of individuating propositions

11 Structured propositions are those that are both a function of things that are not propositions and individuated by those things (propositions construed as sets of possible worlds are compositionally determined but unstructured). Structured propositions are commonly represented as ordered $n$-tuples of the things that compose them. See Schiffer (2003a), sect. 1.3.

12 Schiffer (2003a), Ch. 3.
we cannot happily identify anything as the ‘content’ of a sub-sentential expression token. At the same time, we can retain an essential idea of the revised account of character: the meanings of sub-sentential expression types help to determine the meanings of sentence types, and they determine a relation of fit between them and propositions that might be meant in uttering sentences that have those meanings.

I shall call the meanings I have in mind, the account of which I have developed elsewhere,13 ‘characters*’, because while they are descendants of the revised Kaplanian notion of characters, they are also importantly dissimilar to them. The character* of a complete sentence type — ‘Snow is white,’ as opposed to ‘snow is white’ — is an ordered pair \(<A, P>\), where A is a type of speech act and P is a kind of proposition. Thus, the characters* of ‘It is raining.’ and ‘Is it raining?’ might to a first approximation be represented, respectively, as:

\(<\text{meaning-that, a proposition of the form } \textit{it is raining at place } m \textit{ at time } m'\), \text{where } m \text{ identifies a place implicitly referred to by the speaker and } m' \text{ identifies the time of the utterance}>\)

\(<\text{asking-whether, a proposition of the form } \textit{it is raining at place } m \textit{ at time } m'\), \text{where } m \text{ identifies a place implicitly referred to by the speaker and } m' \text{ identifies the time of the utterance}>\)

The character* of a sub-sentential expression may be construed as a partial determinant of the propositional part of the characters* of the sentences containing the expression, so that we may take the characters* of sub-sentential expressions also to be kinds of propositions. Thus the character* of ‘I’ determines the propositions expressed by sentence tokens containing it to be self-ascriptive propositions, propositions of the kind referred to by that-clauses containing ‘I’ (‘I said that I was hungry’), and thus induces that constraint on the characters* of sentences containing ‘I’. Characters determine characters*, but not vice versa, since the latter are compatible with compositionally-determined propositions but do not require them, so the theorist of compositionally-determined propositions is free to think of expression-type meanings as characters*.

I shall assume the character* account of expression-type meaning as another working hypothesis. Given this assumption, the big question as regards a semantic theory of definite descriptions is about the character* of sentences containing definite descriptions. What, for short, is the character* of sentences of the form ‘The \(F\) is \(G\)?

13 Schiffer (2003a), especially Ch. 3.
When we take expression-type meanings to be characters* (in the sense of ‘meaning’ glossed above), then the question about the nature of the meaning relation becomes a question about the nature of the character* relation: What relation must obtain between two things in order for one to be a character* of the other? In fact, we cannot even explain what it is for something to be a character* independently of an account of the character* relation. This is because being a character* is like being a sibling: just as the property of being a sibling simply is the property of standing in a certain relation to some other thing, so the property of being a character* (or a meaning) simply is the property of standing in a certain relation to some other thing.

So what is the character* relation? Before trying to answer this, we need a more precise statement of the things the relation relates. An expression does not have a character* tout court. It has it in a language or for a certain person. Now, the character* relation that should interest us is one that holds contingently, reflecting the fact that what an expression type means depends on how it, or its parts, are used in communicative behaviour. This character* relation is a four-place relation: expression type \( e \) has character* \( c \) for person \( x \) at time \( t \) (to simplify the exposition, I shall henceforth suppress the time slot in the relation, writing as though the character* relation related an expression type, a character*, and a person). At the same time, \( c \) is a character* that \( e \) has for \( x \) just in case \( c \) is a character* that \( e \) has in some public language of \( x \)'s. So our strategy for explicating the character* relation should be: first, to say what it is for \( c \) to be a character* of \( e \) in language \( L \); second, to say what it is for \( x \) to use \( L \) as a public language, that is, for \( L \) to be a public language of \( x \)'s; and then simply to say that \( c \) is a character* that \( e \) has for \( x \) just in case \( c \) is a character* of \( e \) in some public language of \( x \)'s.

Taking my inspiration (but not all of my details) from David Lewis,\(^{14}\) I shall say, simplifying more than a little,\(^{15}\) that a potential public language \( L_{\Gamma C^*} \) is a triple \(< \Gamma, L, C^*>\) such that:

1. \( \Gamma \), the ‘grammar’ of \( L_{\Gamma C^*} \), is a finitely specifiable set of conditions that incorporate a list of marks or sounds or whatever (the ‘lexicon’ of \( L \)) and certain recursive and other rules, and, on the basis of that lexicon and those rules, recursively define the label ‘sentence of \( L_{\Gamma C^*} \)’ as applicable to each member of a certain infinite subset of those infinitely many finite strings of members of the lexicon.

\(^{14}\) Lewis (1969) and (1983a).

\(^{15}\) The definition in Schiffer (2003a), pp. 157–8, is even more of a simplification.

(2) $L$ is a finitely definable function whose domain of arguments consists of the sentences of $L_{GC}$ and whose range of values consists of ordered pairs $<A, P>$, where $A$ is a type of speech act and $P$ is a kind of proposition. If $L(\sigma) = <A, P>$, we may say that $<A, P>$ is $\sigma$'s character* in $L_{GC}$. The fact that $\sigma$'s character* in $L_{GC}$ is $<A, P>$ is a necessary truth that has nothing to do with how anyone uses $\sigma$ or the words composing it.

(3) $C^*$, the compositional character* theory for $L_{GC}$, is a finitely specifiable theory whose base axioms assign word-size characters* to the 'words' of $L_{GC}$ (i.e., the items in $L_{GC}$'s lexicon) and which issues in a theorem of the form $L(\sigma) = <A, P>$ for each sentence of $L_{GC}$. If the compositional character* theory assigns a kind of proposition $P'$ to an expression $e$—either in an axiom, if $e$ is a word, or in a theorem, if $e$ is complex—then we may say that $P'$ is the character* of $e$ in $L_{GC}$.

The question now—the public-language-relation problem—is: what relation must obtain between a person $x$ and a potential public language $L_{GC}$ in order for $L_{GC}$ to be $x$'s actual public language (or one of $x$'s actual public languages)? To ask this question relative to the Lewisian setup is precisely to ask about the nature of the character* relation. For, as I already said, the character* relation that interests us is the one that holds contingently: it is that relation that holds between a person $x$, an expression $e$, and a character* $c$ when $c$ is the character* $e$ has for $x$. And $c$ is a character* $e$ has for $x$ just in case there is a potential public language $L_{GC}$ such that $c$ is a character* of $e$ in $L_{GC}$, and $L_{GC}$ is an actual public language of $x$'s. How is the public-language-relation problem to be solved? Since meaning supervenes on language use, we need to know how $x$ must use a potential language $L_{GC}$ in order for $L_{GC}$ to be $x$'s idiolect, the language $x$ actually uses in communication.

It is apt to seem initially plausible that we can explain what makes a person's idiolect her idiolect in terms of the communicative conventions or practices to which she conforms, and thus, ultimately, in terms of her beliefs and intentions in using the language. But this reasonable thought turns out to be a dead end. First consider the suggestion that the propositional attitudes that make $L_{GC}$ $x$'s language are about $L_{GC}$, in that specifications of the propositional contents of those attitudes require that-clauses that contain a singular term that refers to $L_{GC}$. An

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16 One way in which this definition of a potential public language is a simplification is that in its talk of a function that correlates sentences with characters* it does not allow for ambiguity. This simplifying liberty should not affect my use of the definition.
example of such a proposal would be a proposal that contained the condition that, for any proposition \( p \), \( x \) expects not to mean \( q \) unless \( x \) does so by uttering a sentence \( \sigma \) of \( L_{\Gamma C^*} \) such that, for some kind of proposition \( P \), \( L(\sigma) \equiv \langle \text{meaning-that}, P \rangle \) and \( q \) is a proposition of kind \( P \). There is much in this condition that ought to strike one as requiring concepts and thoughts ordinary speakers do not have, but consider just the implausibility of an ordinary person’s having relevant propositional attitudes about \( L_{\Gamma C^*} \) (or even \( L \)). \( L_{\Gamma C^*} \), by definition, is an extremely complex abstract object, and no ordinary speaker can be expected to think of \( L_{\Gamma C^*} \) in terms of its definition, since that definition would include a definition of the grammar \( \Gamma \), a specification of the compositional character \( \Gamma^* \) theory \( C^* \), and a definition of the interpretation function \( L \). But then how is \( x \) to think of \( L_{\Gamma C^*} \), and to think of it in such a way that enables \( x \) to know what any sentence—or even any sentence \( x \) is apt to utter—means in \( L_{\Gamma C^*} \)? I submit that if it is not already clear, then it will be clear on reflection that an ordinary person has no such way of thinking of his idiolect.\(^{17}\)

Next consider the suggestion that the propositional attitudes that define the actual-language relation need not be about that potential public language which is one’s actual public language idiolect. This suggestion might take one of two forms. First, it might be proposed that while the ordinary speaker is not in a position to have appropriate beliefs about her idiolect, she is in a position to have them about its primitive words and constructions. This would be to postulate the realization in each speaker of a complex set of interlocking practices, one pertaining to each primitive word and grammatical construction in her language: one for ‘red’, one for ‘of’, one for the interrogative mood, and so on. A word has meaning only in the context of a language, and knowing its meaning would require, roughly speaking, knowing how it can be combined with other words in the language in order to produce meaningful sentences of the language (which is why the practices would have to be interlocking). But this level of sophistication is tantamount to that required for possession of appropriate propositional attitudes about the entire language, and therefore this suggestion is no more plausible than the one it hopes to replace.

The second form that might be taken by the suggestion that the propositional attitudes in question need not be about the potential language has its basis in a proposal David Lewis made about the way in which a certain appeal to conventions of language use solves the actual-

\(^{17}\) David Lewis (1969) concurs. See also Schiffer (1993).
language-relation problem. The crucial idea is that the beliefs and intentions that underlie the conventional practices need pertain neither to the language that is used nor to its individual words and constructions but merely to particular utterances in the language. We need not rehearse Lewis’s complicated account to get the gist; it is manifested in the proposal that:

$L_{GC}^*$ is a public language of $x$’s if $x$ belongs to a group of communicators $G$ such that:

members of $G$ frequently communicate with one another;

whenever a member of $G$ communicates with another member of $G$, she does so by uttering a sentence of $L_{GC}^*$; and

$$\forall \sigma \forall y ((\sigma \text{ is a sentence of } L_{GC}^* \land L(\sigma) = <A, P> \land (Gy \land y \text{ utters } \sigma)) \rightarrow \exists q(Pq \land y \text{ As } q)).$$

So far as I know, the problem with this proposal sinks every proposal which attempts to solve the actual-language-relation problem in terms of actual, or even potential, linguistic behaviour. The problem with the proposal is that it is doomed not to provide the sufficient condition it claims in that if any potential language satisfies the displayed right-hand side, then so will infinitely many other languages which $x$ clearly does not use. For suppose that English is Jones’s public language and let English$^+$ be the same as English as regards every sentence that anyone is ever likely to utter but departs radically from English thereafter. For example, ‘giraffe’ means the same as ‘grapefruit’ in every sentence of English$^+$ in which ‘giraffe’ occurs more than one hundred times. If English satisfies the foregoing condition, then so will English$^+$, but English$^+$ is not a language that anyone uses. Nor will it help to go counterfactual by saying that if a member of $G$ were to utter $\sigma$ and $L(\sigma) = <A, P>$, then she would $A q$, where $q$ is a proposition of kind $P$; for it may be that if Jones were to utter a sentence in which ‘giraffe’ occurred more than one hundred times, that would trigger a neurological event that would result in her suddenly becoming a speaker of English$^+$ rather than of English.

To solve the actual-language-relation problem, and thereby to say what the meaning (= character$^*$) relation is, we need something that

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will nail down all of a potential language at once, and for this it must appeal to something more than a language user’s actual propositional attitudes or intentional practices. I locate this something more in the information processing that takes one from the perception of the utterance of a sentence to the knowledge of what was meant in that utterance. The specific proposal I have in mind is supported by an account of knowledge of meaning which I have presented elsewhere. Knowing what an expression means, I have argued, can be explained neither in terms of propositional knowledge (e.g. knowing that the expression means such-and-such) nor in terms of knowing how (e.g. knowing how to say things by uttering sentences of the language). It can, however, be explained in terms of the information processing that underlies language understanding.

Knowing what a sentence means is an important phenomenon because of the crucial role it plays in understanding utterances of that sentence. For example, Al utters ‘It’s snowing there’ and Betty straightaway knows that Al meant that it was at that time snowing in Turin. Crucial to the processing that led from Betty’s perception of Al’s utterance to her knowledge of what he meant was her knowing the meaning of the sentence type ‘It’s snowing there’. My proposal is that to know the meaning of a sentence is either to be in, or to be suitably disposed to be in, a state that plays a certain role—what we may call ‘the knowledge-of-meaning’ role—in the information processing that takes one from the perception of the utterance of a sentence to the knowledge of what was meant in uttering that sentence. More than one kind of state can play the knowledge-of-meaning role, but my hypothesis is that what unifies all those states, and thereby defines the knowledge-of-meaning role, is that those states either directly or indirectly link the sentences they concern with their characters*. Let me try to spell this out a little in the following way.

Suppose that potential language $L_{\Gamma C^*}$ is the actual public language of Mary and those with whom she communicates on a daily basis. Let $\sigma$ be an $L_{\Gamma C^*}$ sentence whose character* is $<A, P>$ (i.e., let $L(\sigma) = <A, P>$), for a certain type of speech act $A$ and a certain kind of proposition $P$. In the event, a literal, unembedded utterance of $\sigma$ requires there to be a proposition $q$ such that (i) $q$ is of kind $P$ and (ii) the speaker, in uttering $\sigma$, $A$-ed $q$. When Mary understands such a literal utterance of $\sigma$, she perceives the utterance of $\sigma$ and knows that the speaker, in uttering $\sigma$, $A$-ed $q$. My proposal is that the sequence of information-processing states that begins with the perception and ends with the knowledge

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20 In Schiffer (2003a) and, in a slightly earlier version, (2003b).
contains a state that directly or indirectly represents $\sigma$ as linked with its character* $<A, P>$. Being in, or being suitably disposed to be in, such a character*-linking information-processing state is, I suggest, what constitutes knowing what a sentence means in one’s public-language idiolect.

More than one kind of state can represent the linkage of a sentence with its character*. For example, it might be a subdoxastic state whose representational content is simply the ordered pair $<\sigma, <A, P>>$; it might be the explicit propositional knowledge that in a literal and unembedded utterance of $\sigma$ the speaker would be $A$-ing a proposition of kind $P$; it might effect the linkage indirectly, by mapping $\sigma$ onto a Mentalese sentence with a certain content, perhaps à la Harvey of my Remnants of Meaning (Ch. 7); and there are other possibilities. It is an empirical question how the linkage of a sentence and its character* is represented in our actual information processing, but an empirical speculation may help both to further illustrate my proposal about knowledge of meaning and to set up its relevance to defining the character* relation.

My speculation about the kind of states that in fact play the knowledge-of-meaning role in our normal understanding of public-language utterances is, very briefly, as follows. If the compositional character* theory $C^*$ built into the definition of $L_{GC}$ is internally represented, understanding the utterance of a novel sentence of $L_{GC}$ might work in the following way. Betty hears Al’s utterance of $\sigma$, a sentence she has never before encountered but which is composed of familiar words in familiar ways. Betty’s perception of the utterance of $\sigma$ combines with other stuff to form a representation of the uttered sentence, which representation serves as input to Betty’s internally represented compositional character* theory, which theory in turn yields as output a representation of $\sigma$ as paired with its character*, $<A, P>$. This representation is fed into certain higher, more consciously accessible, information processing to enable Betty defeasibly to believe that Al is $A$-ing a proposition of kind $P$. Still further consciously accessible, but not necessarily conscious, information processing results in the knowledge that Al, in uttering $\sigma$, was $A$-ing that such-and-such. It is the state that pairs $\sigma$ with its character* $<A, P>$ which plays the knowledge-of-meaning processing role.

Finally, the bearing of all this on the actual-language-relation problem, and therewith on the explication of the character* relation. I suggest, first, that a sufficient condition for $L_{GC}$-s’s being used by $x$ as a public language is that $x$ belongs to a group of communicators who reg-
ularly communicate by uttering sentences of $L_{\Gamma C^*}$, and, when they do, the knowledge-of-meaning role is played by states that pair expressions with characters* via an internal representation of the compositional character* theory in terms of which $L_{\Gamma C^*}$ is defined, and, second, that it is the satisfaction in us of this sufficient condition which explains how it is that our public language sentences have the characters* they happen to have.\(^{21}\)

There is an implicit corollary of this account of the character* relation that we should notice for its later relevance. Let us stipulate that $x$'s unembedded utterance of a sentence $\sigma$ constitutes a literal use of $\sigma$ just in case $\exists L_{\Gamma C^*}, \exists A \exists P \exists q (L_{\Gamma C^*}$ is an actual public language of $x$'s $\wedge <A, P>$ is $\sigma$'s character* in $L_{\Gamma C^*}$ $\wedge P(q)$ $\wedge$ in uttering $\sigma \times A$-ed $q$). Then I have speculated that the processing that results in an $L_{\Gamma C^*}$ speaker's knowledge that in uttering $\sigma \times A$-ed $q$ will contain a state that directly or indirectly represents $\sigma$ as linked with its character*, $<A, P>$. The implicit corollary to which I wish to draw attention concerns non-literal utterances of a sentence. It is that even when $\sigma$ is uttered non-literally, a processing state that links $\sigma$ with its character* will play a role in a hearer's understanding of the utterance. Suppose that Henrietta utters 'He has to walk around in the shower to get wet' to mean that Lester is very thin. My point is that a state that represents the sentence uttered as linked with its character*—roughly, $<\text{meaning-that}, \text{a proposition of the form } m \text{ has to walk around in the shower to get wet,}$ where $m$ identifies a referred-to male>—will play an essential role in the processing that underlies a hearer's understanding of Henrietta's metaphorical utterance. This is consistent with Paul Grice's speculation that the implicature generated in a case like this depends on the speaker's implicit expectation that the hearer will first realize what the speaker would mean if she meant a proposition that conformed to the uttered sentence's meaning, next realize that that cannot be what the speaker means, and then use information available to her and the speaker to infer what was meant.\(^{22}\) But even if the Gricean mechanism does not get the processing exactly right, it is still plausible to think that some sort of representation of the meaning of the sentence uttered plays an essential information-processing role even when the utterance is non-literal.

\(^{21}\) Compare Loar's (1976) requirement that a 'grammar' for the language be grounded in those who use the language.

\(^{22}\) Grice (1989b).
3. The Russellian theory relative to the architecture
Given the character\(^*\) account of expression-type meaning, what is the best formulation of a Russellian theory of definite descriptions? For our purposes we may begin and pretty much end with the question, 'What should a Russellian take to be the common nature of the characters\(^*\) of sentences of the form "The F is G"?' I assume that the speech act component is the generic notion of indicative speaker-meaning—roughly, a person’s meaning that such-and-such\(^{23}\)—and thus take the operative question to be about the character\(^*\)’s propositional component.

Given the character\(^*\) theory of meaning and the need to accommodate incomplete definite descriptions such as ‘the dog’, a theory of definite descriptions counts as Russellian if, but only if, a proposition \(p\) conforms to the character\(^*\) of ‘The F is G’ just in case there is a property \(H\) such that for any possible world \(w\), \(p\) is true in \(w\) iff in \(w:\ \exists x(\forall y((Hy \land Fy) \leftrightarrow y = x) \land Gx)\), and false in \(w\) iff in \(w:\ \neg \exists x(\forall y((Hy \land Fy) \leftrightarrow y = x) \land Gx)\).

More than one kind of proposition—including object-dependent propositions (e.g. \(H\) might be the property of being identical to Fido)—can have these Russellian truth conditions, and I should say something about one distinction that occurs in the literature. This is the distinction between ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’ theories of the proposition expressed by utterances of ‘The F is G’\(^{24}\). If, as seems reasonable, we take quantified noun phrases (‘some girls’, ‘every fast swimmer’) to be restricted quantifiers, then we can take the Russellian to construe definite descriptions as restricted quantifier phrases and to represent ‘The F is G’ (at least at a certain level of abstraction) as

\[
(9) \quad [\text{the}_x :Fx] \ x \text{ is } G. \quad ^{25}
\]

This constrains but does not determine how the proposition expressed by an utterance of ‘The F is G’ should be represented, let alone the contribution the restricted quantifier ‘the F’, represented as ‘[\text{the}_x :Fx]’, makes to it, for that is partly what is at issue between explicit and implicit theories of that proposition.

\(^{23}\)Why not asserting, saying, or stating that? Two things. First, meaning—that is the most general assertoric speech act, one that is entailed by all the others, and second, there is a prevalent philosophical use of ‘assert’, ‘say’, and ‘state’ according to which one can assert, say, or state that such-and-such in uttering \(\sigma\) only if the proposition that such-and-such conforms to the meaning of \(\sigma\).

\(^{24}\)See Neale (1990), sect. 3.7, and Neale (2004), where the explicit/implicit distinction is treated in more detail.

\(^{25}\)I borrow this style of representation from Neale (2004).
Let us say that the proposition e-expressed by (9) is the proposition that would be expressed by an utterance of ‘The F is G’ when ‘the F’ occurs as a ‘complete’ description, such as ‘the first dog born at sea’. Then the explicit theory holds that for any utterance of ‘The F is G’ there is some (possibly very complex) predicate H such that the proposition expressed by an utterance of ‘The F is G’ is the proposition e-expressed by

(10) \([\text{the}_x: Hx \land Fx] \ x \text{ is } G\)

(in the limiting case, when ‘the F’ is uttered as a complete description, H is the null predicate). Thus, the explicit theory holds that the proposition expressed in a literal utterance of, say, (7) (‘The dog growls’) is, for some predicate H, the proposition e-expressed by

(11) \([\text{the}_x: Hx \land \text{dog } x] \ x \text{ growls} \).

To believe this proposition is to believe that the unique H dog growls.

Now let us say that the proposition i-expressed by (9) relative to set S is the proposition expressed by (9) when S is taken to be the domain of the restricted quantifier and the proposition contains no descriptive material not explicitly expressed in (9). The implicit theory holds that the proposition expressed in a literal utterance of ‘The F is G’ is for some domain S the proposition i-expressed by (9) relative to S. For example, this theorist might hold that a particular utterance of (7) expresses the proposition i-expressed by

(12) \([\text{the}_x: \text{dog } x] \ x \text{ growls} \)

when the domain of the restricted quantifier is the set of dogs in the speaker and hearer’s field of vision. Russellians who take the implicit approach may disagree about how the involvement of this proposition with the contextually-determined domain, and thus the proposition itself, should be represented, and there is even room for them to disagree about the proposition’s possible worlds truth conditions. But as regards the critical issues I shall soon force, the only question of concern is whether believing the implicit theorist’s proposition is to all intents and purposes the same as believing the explicit theorist’s proposition.

I think that to all intents and purposes they are the same. If the explicit version of Russelianism is correct, then in a literal utterance of (7) there is some property H such that to believe what the speaker said in uttering (7) is to believe what is e-expressed by (11), namely, that the unique H dog growls. Here, as already intimated, it is not required that
Let H be a purely general, or object-independent, property. There is no reason for the Russellian not to allow that H might be the object-dependent property of being held on a leash by Louise—a property that is individuated at least partly in terms of Louise and would not exist if she did not exist—and it might be a further tenet of this Russellian’s theory that while one cannot believe that the unique dog held on a leash by Louise growls without thinking of Louise in some way or other, there is no particular way of thinking of her that is required in order to believe the proposition. Now let us turn to the implicit theory, for which there remains the question of how those taking this line are to represent what is believed by one who believes the proposition i-expressed by (12) relative to a given domain of quantification. If the implicit version is correct, then one who understands what is said in an utterance of a sentence containing a definite description must know that quantifier’s domain of quantification, for that must be required just in order to know the proposition’s truth and falsity conditions. Thus, one thing the implicit-theory Russellian might hold is that, for some property Φ such that S = the set of things that have Φ, the proposition represents the domain S via the property Φ, so that one cannot believe the proposition expressed by (7) without believing that the unique Φ dog growls. Moreover, this Russellian would evidently also have to hold that believing that the unique Φ dog growls entailed that one also believed the proposition i-expressed by (12) when its quantifier’s domain of quantification was defined as the set of things having Φ. The theorist would evidently have to hold this because it seems very implausible to hold that the proposition i-expressed by (12), which represents the domain in the stipulated way, contains further conceptual elements pertaining to technical notions of quantification, since if that were so it is difficult to see how these propositions could be available to ordinary speakers. There is a further question whether the implicit-theory Russellian who takes this route should represent the possible worlds truth conditions of the proposition to be such that its truth-value in an arbitrary world w turns on the set of things in w that have Φ or on the set of things in the actual world that have Φ (which is why I said two paragraphs back that there is room for these Russelians to disagree about possible worlds truth conditions). I take it, then, that believing the proposition expressed by (7) on this account is for all intents and purposes the same as believing the proposition e-expressed either by

\[ [\text{the}_x \Phi x \land \text{dog } x] \ x \text{ growls} \]

or by

[\text{the}_x \cdot \text{Actually-} \Phi x \land \text{dog } x] \ x \text{ growls.}

Does the Russellian who takes the implicit approach have any other option for representing what is believed by one who believes the \(i\)-proposition expressed by (12) relative to a domain \(S\)? It may seem that she does, that she might hold, first, that the proposition simply contains the set \(S\) itself; second, that grasp of this proposition does not require any particular way of thinking of \(S\); and, third, that one way of thinking of it is by description. And it might appear that on this way of going implicit, one who believes what is said in the utterance of (7) may perforce end up believing, for some \(\Phi\), \text{that the unique } \Phi \text{ dog growls} but that would not be the proposition the speaker asserted in uttering (7). A hearer can know what proposition was asserted without thinking of the domain \(S\) contained in the proposition in the same way the speaker thinks of it. The appearance of an alternative option is illusory. If \(S\) itself is 'contained' in the proposition expressed by an utterance of (7), then that is simply tantamount to an explicit theorist's holding that the proposition expressed by an utterance of (7) contains the set-dependent property of belonging to \(S\), just as, in an earlier example, the property might be the object-dependent property involving the person Louise. For this implicit theorist, believing the proposition \(i\)-expressed by (12) relative to \(S\) would be tantamount to believing the proposition \(e\)-expressed by

[\text{the}_x \cdot x \in S \land \text{dog } x] \ x \text{ growls.}

Since believing the implicit theorist’s proposition is for all intents and purposes the same as believing the explicit theorist's proposition, I shall henceforth, for simplicity of exposition, assume that the Russellian takes the explicit line on the nature of the propositions asserted in literal utterances of ‘The \(F\) is \(G\)’. That is to say, I shall assume that to be a Russellian is to a hold that the propositional component of the character* of ‘The \(F\) is \(G\)’ is the kind of proposition \(e\)-expressed by

[\text{the}_x \cdot Hx \land Fx] \ x \text{ is } G

for any predicate \(H\), however complex. To believe such a proposition is to believe that the thing that is uniquely \(H\) and \(F\) is \(G\), and for any possible world \(w\), the proposition is true in \(w\) iff in \(w\) something is uniquely \(H\) and \(F\) and also \(G\), false otherwise.
4. A problem for the Russelian theory
I have so far said nothing about Russell’s or anyone else’s reasons for accepting the Russelian theory. I assume that readers of this article are familiar with the reasons Russell himself gave in ‘On Denoting’ and elsewhere,26 and in the next two sections at least some of the motivations of contemporary advocates of the theory will emerge as I consider how they might respond to the well-known problem for the theory now to be rehearsed. This is the problem that so-called ‘referential uses’ of definite descriptions raise for the Russelian theory of definite descriptions, now understood in the way specified above.

In order to put the problem in its best light, it will be useful to have a foil, so let us first consider an utterance involving a demonstrative use of a pronoun.

‘He’ Scenario. You and I are walking through Washington Square Park when a bizarrely behaving man begins approaching us. I say to you, ‘Be careful. He’s deranged.’

The following three things are plausibly true of ‘He’ Scenario. First, the proposition I meant in uttering ‘He’s deranged’ was an object-dependent proposition, a proposition that is partly individuated in terms of the man to whom my utterance of ‘he’ referred—Abe, to give him a name—and which would not exist if Abe did not exist, a proposition that is true in an arbitrary possible world only if Abe exists and is deranged in that world. (We need not, and I think should not, assume that the Abe-dependent proposition is the mere singular proposition <Abe, the property of being deranged>: you may believe what is asserted by an utterance of ‘He’s deranged’ but not by an utterance of ‘Abe’s deranged’, even though both utterances assert Abe-dependent propositions—albeit distinct Abe-dependent propositions, which may even have the same possible-worlds truth conditions. But even though distinct object-dependent propositions may have the same possible-worlds truth conditions, we should probably not require that the Abe-dependent proposition I meant in ‘He’ Scenario is true in an arbitrary world if—as opposed to merely only if—Abe is deranged in that world. I am, however, inclined to think that Abe’s being deranged in the world is a sufficient, as well as necessary, condition for the proposition’s being true at that world.27) Second, I was speaking literally: the proposition I

26 See also Gary Ostertag’s illuminating discussion of Russell’s motivations in (1998a). Some of the quotations or citations I later use were suggested to me by Ostertag’s use of them.
27 See Schiffer (2003a), sect. 2.4.
meant was of the kind contained in the character* of ‘He’s deranged’. Third, in uttering ‘He’s deranged’ I did not also mean or assert any descriptive proposition about Abe. That is, there is no property Φ such that in uttering ‘He’s deranged’ I either determinately or even indeterminately meant that the Φ was deranged, where Abe was uniquely Φ. True, I believed of the man to whom I referred that he was deranged under numerous uniqueness properties which you and I mutually knew him to instantiate—the only man rapidly approaching us; the only man before us who is screaming that the end of the world is nigh; the only bearded person in sight wearing a pink fuzzy bathrobe and a Princeton cap; the only man in sight frothing at the mouth and wildly flinging his arms about; the only bearded man rapidly approaching us in a pink fuzzy bathrobe and a Princeton cap while frothing at the mouth, wildly flinging his arms about, and screaming that the end of the world is nigh; and so on for numerous other such uniqueness properties—but I did not have communicative intentions with respect to any descriptive proposition containing one of those properties that could make it true that I determinately or even indeterminately meant such a proposition. There are very many propositions in play in one way or another in any given act of communication, but very few of them are the contents of acts of speaker-meaning.

Now consider a variant on ‘He’ Scenario:

‘The Guy’ Scenario. Everything is as it was in ‘He’ Scenario except that instead of uttering ‘Be careful. He’s deranged,’ I now utter ‘Be careful. The guy’s deranged.’

It should be clear how this raises an apparent problem for the Russelian theory: (a) the three things true of ‘He’ Scenario seem also to be true, mutatis mutandis, of ‘The Guy’ Scenario; and (b) if they are true, then the Russelian theory is false: it cannot accommodate all referential uses of definite descriptions.

Re (a). In the first place, it seems undeniable that, whatever else was going on, in uttering ‘The guy’s deranged’, I referred to Abe and meant an Abe-dependent proposition to the effect that he was deranged, a proposition that is true in an arbitrary possible world only if Abe exists and is deranged in that world. In the second place, I was evidently speaking literally, in the sense that I meant a proposition that conformed to the character* of ‘The guy’s deranged’, so that if all that I meant in uttering that sentence was the Abe-dependent proposition, then that proposition conforms to the sentence’s character*. And in the third place, psychological parity argues that if no descriptive proposition was meant in ‘He’ Sce-
scenario, then none was meant in ‘The Guy’ Scenario, either, for by hypoth-
esis I had the same communicative intentions in both scenarios, and
what a speaker means in uttering a sentence arguably supervenes on the
communicative intentions with which she uttered the sentence. In both
scenarios, my communicative intention was to make you aware of the
truth of the Abe-dependent proposition common to the two scenarios; I
had to utter something, and it was, we may suppose, a matter of indiffer-
ence to me whether I said ‘He’s deranged’ or ‘The guy’s deranged’. Under-
standing a referential utterance of ‘The F is G’ seems to be just a matter of
knowing the object-dependent proposition the speaker meant.28

Re (b). If the three points mentioned in (a) are true, then it follows
immediately that my statement of the Russelian theory is false. For my
statement of the theory entails that only descriptive propositions can
conform to the character* of ‘The guy’s deranged’, but it follows from
the three points that the Abe-dependent proposition both conforms to
the character* and is not a descriptive proposition.

5. The standard Russelian response
How might the Russelian respond to the problem posed by referential
uses of definite descriptions and, in particular, to the problem as just
formulated? Contemporary Russelians do not deny that in referential
uses of definite descriptions speakers mean object-dependent proposi-
tions; they would not deny that in ‘The Guy’ Scenario I meant the Abe-
dependent proposition. This means that they must either (i) agree that
the Abe-dependent proposition is not a descriptive proposition but hold
that it does not conform to the character* of ‘The guy’s deranged’, or else
(ii) hold that it is a descriptive proposition, and therefore does conform
to the sentence’s character*. Option (i), this section’s topic, is implied by
the standard response of contemporary defenders of the Russelian the-
ory to the referential-use problem. It is the view expressed by Stephen
Neale when he wrote that ‘a sentence of the form “[he] is G” is semanti-
cally very different from a sentence of the form “the [guy] is G”. An
utterance of the former expresses an object-dependent proposition; an
utterance of the latter expresses an object-independent proposition.’29

28 As Gareth Evans (1982) observed, ‘when [a referential] use of a description is made, the task
of the audience is surely to fasten upon the right object, rather than upon the right complete
description; there will be several equally good candidates (“the man over there”, “the man under
the tree”, “the man beside the woman”), between which it will be quite pointless to choose’ (p. 325).

29 Neale (1990), p. 317. Neale’s example involved the sentence forms ‘that F is G’ and ‘the F is G’,
but the surrounding text makes explicit his commitment to saying the same about ‘he is G’ and
‘the man is G’.
The standard response to the general problem posed by referential uses of definite descriptions may be put in the following way.

It is not to be disputed that there are referential uses of definite descriptions and that in a referential utterance of ‘The F is G’ the speaker means an x-dependent proposition, where x is the thing to which the speaker was referring in her utterance of ‘the F’, and where the x-dependent proposition is true in any possible world w just in case x is G in w. Nor is it to be disputed that this x-dependent proposition is not a descriptive proposition. Moreover, it is also not to be disputed that the Russellian theory is true of the non-referential, attributional cases, cases where, roughly speaking, in uttering ‘The F is G’ the speaker is not using ‘the F’ to refer to some particular thing but merely means that whatever is uniquely F is also G. Now, referential cases constitute a counterexample to the Russellian theory only if they show that ‘The F is G’ is ambiguous, as it would have to be if the content of a referential utterance is a non-descriptive, object-dependent proposition, whereas the content of an attributional utterance is a Russellian descriptive proposition. It should go without saying that, all other things being equal, a theory that does not find ‘The F is G’ ambiguous is preferable to one that does. This maxim is enshrined in Grice’s ‘Modified Occam’s Razor: Don’t multiply meanings beyond necessity!’30 and it was what Kripke was alluding to when he warned that ‘it is very much the lazy man’s approach in philosophy to posit ambiguities when in trouble.’31

The Russellian theory is able to provide the univocal semantics. In fact, not only do the referential cases not refute the theory, they are actually predicted by it. The general point is familiar from old issues in the theory of meaning. At one time it was thought that the classical account of ‘and’, according to which ‘P and Q’ is equivalent to ‘Q and P’, could not be right because in uttering, say, ‘Alice got pregnant and married Bob’, a speaker would mean that Alice first got pregnant and then married Bob, whereas just the reverse would be meant in an utterance of ‘Alice married Bob and got pregnant’. But as Grice showed in his theory of conversational implicature, quite general mechanisms pertaining to rationality, conversation, and speaker-meaning are always in place, and they imply that rational speakers will generally try to narrate events in the order in which they occurred, so that the speaker-meaning facts cited will obtain even on

30 Grice (1989b).
the assumption that ‘Alice got pregnant and married Bob’ and ‘Alice married Bob and got pregnant’ are truth-conditionally equivalent.\textsuperscript{32} In the same sort of way, these always-in-place pragmatic mechanisms would generate referential utterances of ‘The $F$ is $G$’ even on the assumption that the semantic content—the proposition the literal speaker is saying—is, for some contextually determined property $H$, the descriptive proposition that the thing that is uniquely $H$ and $F$ is $G$. Suppose, for example, that I want to tell you that John Rhododendron is coming to lunch but am not sure if you know his name, although I do know that you know that he is dean of the college. Then I might say, ‘The dean of the college is coming to lunch’ and in so doing both state the descriptive proposition that the dean of our college is coming to lunch, and thereby also mean, of the dean, that he is coming to lunch. To be sure, it is sometimes, perhaps often, the case that when sentences containing incomplete definite descriptions (‘The cat is on the mat’) are uttered, there is no one descriptive content that was determinately meant, but in such cases there will have been two or more that were indeterminately meant, that is, two or more such that it is indeterminate whether the speaker meant them. This sort of indeterminacy in semantic content does not threaten the theory, since it is also found in attributive utterances of incomplete descriptions and in the best way of accommodating incompleteness for indefinite descriptions. For example, when the detective in Donnellan’s attributive example says, ‘The murderer must be insane’, it may well be indeterminate whether he means that Smith’s murderer must be insane, that the murderer of the dead man before us must be insane, that the murderer of that guy must be insane, and so on.\textsuperscript{33} And when I say ‘Everyone passed’, it may be indeterminate whether I mean everyone who took the midterm exam in the philosophy of language course I am teaching this semester passed, or that everyone passed the exam I gave last Thursday, and so on, for several other equally good precisifications of what I mean.

In this way we see that the referential cases are no threat to the Russelian theory of definite descriptions. In those cases, the semantic content of the speaker’s utterance—the proposition that the speaker is saying, the one (in Schiffer’s terms) that conforms to the character\textsuperscript{a} of the sentence uttered—is a descriptive proposition, but in (determinately or indeterminately) saying that proposition, the

\textsuperscript{32} Grice (1989b).

\textsuperscript{33} Donnellan (1966).
speaker also means an \( x \)-dependent proposition, where \( x \) is the thing to which she was referring in the act of speaker-reference she performed in her utterance.

How good is this defence of Russell’s theory, especially in light of its bearing on examples like that described in the preceding section and given the character* theory of meaning sketched in section 2? (For expository convenience, I shall continue to use ‘say’ in the following stipulative way: one \( \text{says} \ p \) in uttering \( \sigma \) iff one means \( p \) in uttering \( \sigma \) and \( p \) conforms to the, or a, character* of \( \sigma \).

1. If referential cases constitute counterexamples to the Russellian theory, then what is said in the referential utterance of ‘The murderer is insane’ is the Jones-dependent proposition which is true in any possible world \( w \) only if, and arguably if, Jones, the actual murderer, is insane in \( w \), whether or not she murdered anyone in \( w \), while what is said in the attributive utterance is the descriptive proposition \( \text{that the murderer of Smith is insane} \), which is true in any possible world \( w \) iff in \( w \) someone both uniquely murdered Smith and is insane. Nevertheless, it does not follow from the fact (if it is a fact) that referential cases are counterexamples that sentences of the form ‘The \( F \) is \( G \)’ are ambiguous. Nothing about the ability of utterances of ‘The \( F \) is \( G \)’ to have two such disparate kinds of semantic contents precludes the propositional component of the sentence’s character* from being a kind of proposition that is instantiated both by the object-dependent non-descriptive proposition asserted in the referential utterance and by the object-independent descriptive proposition asserted in the attributive case. For suppose the kind of proposition that constitutes the propositional component of the character* of ‘The \( F \) is \( G \)’ is simply the property of being a proposition whose actual truth is secured just in case one particular \( F \) thing is \( G \). That would yield a univocal character* for ‘The murderer is insane’ which accommodates both the Jones-dependent proposition the speaker meant in the referential case and the descriptive proposition he meant in the attributive case. Since the Jones-dependent proposition would not be the semantic content of the referential utterance if Jones were not a murderer, and since the Jones-independent proposition asserted in the attributive utterance requires whoever murdered Smith to be a murderer, both the Jones-dependent proposition and the Jones-independent proposition are propositions whose actual truth is secured just in case one particular murderer—Jones in the referential case, whoever murdered Smith in the attributive—is insane, and therefore
both would fit the propositional component of the sentence type ‘The murderer is insane’, if that component was that kind of proposition to which a proposition belongs provided its actual truth is secured just in case one particular murderer is insane.

Of course, the fact that it is easy to see how a single character* can be instantiated by both object-dependent and descriptive propositions does not imply that there would be such a character* if the Russellian theory cannot accommodate referential cases. I am supposing that the contemporary Russellian will represent ‘the F’ as the restricted quantifier ‘[the x: Fx]’, so that if the theory is true of attributive uses of ‘The F is G’, then in those cases the logical form underlying the sentence’s surface form necessitates a character* whose propositional component is the kind of proposition to which would belong the propositions expressed by every complete substitution instance of ‘[the x: Hx \land Fx] x is G’. But if ‘the’ occurs as a quantifier in the attributive cases but not in the referential cases, then that suggests that ‘The F is G’ is the surface form of two quite different logical forms, and it may be hard to see how to represent the contribution ‘the’ makes to the character* of a sentence in which it occurs when it occurs there as a quantifier other than as necessitating a character* of the kind just specified. I find this response plausible, although the issues here are complex, and so am inclined to think that ‘The F is G’ is ambiguous, that is, does have two characters* if the Russellian theory is true of the attributive cases but not of the referential cases.

2. But so? Ambiguity is rife in natural language, and an account that attributes two characters* to ‘The F is G’ might just be the correct account. The pronoun ‘she’ apparently sometimes occurs as a referential singular term and sometimes as a bound variable (‘Every mathematician thinks she is smarter than every physicist’), and that evidently necessitates ascribing two different characters* to ‘she is smarter than every physicist’. There is no point complaining about ambiguity unless a univocal theory is a realistic contender, and we are not yet in a position to decide on the plausibility of the Russellian’s claim that the object-dependent proposition the speaker means in a referential case is not also one she says.

3. It is often assumed that the Russellian theory is the correct theory of at least attributive uses of definite descriptions. This assumption slights Frege, for whom definite descriptions functioned as singular terms even when used attributively, in that sense of ‘singular term’ according
to which \( t \) occurs in \( \{ t \text{ is } G \} \) as a singular term just in case \( \{ t \text{ is } G \} \) is true iff 
\[ \exists x(x \text{ is the referent of } t \land x \text{ is } G), \]
and false iff 
\[ \exists x(x \text{ is the referent of } t \land x \text{ is not } G). \]
For Frege, you assert a proposition that is neither true nor false when you say ‘The present king of France is bald’. His theory makes it easy to avoid ambiguity and have a single character* for ‘The \( F \) is \( G \)’, even allowing that utterances of it may assert either object-dependent or non-object-dependent propositions; and, unlike its Russellian rival, it offers a straightforward explanation of why ascribing falsity to what is said by an utterance of ‘The \( F \) is \( G \)’ implies that the \( F \) happens not to be \( G \). True, Frege’s theory challenges classical semantics (bivalence) and logic (excluded middle), but it is not obvious to me that it, or any theory like it, is determinately false on that account.\(^{34}\) In fact, there is evidently some reason to think definite descriptions are not quantifier phrases. As Marga Reimer has pointed out, in undisputed cases of restricted quantifiers of the form \( \text{Determiner}^AF \), the sentence \( \{ \text{Determiner}^AF \text{ is/are } G \} \) can be used to answer the question ‘How many \( Fs \) are \( G \)?’; but ‘The \( F \) is \( G \)’ cannot be used to answer that question.\(^{35}\) At the same time, Robert May has suggested that the hypothesis that definite descriptions are (at least in certain uses) quantifier phrases is corroborated by their having interacting scope relations, seen in sentences such as every man admires the woman he loves and by the differential distribution of any, seen in the contrast of The students who had ever read anything about phrenology attended Gall’s lecture with *The students who attended Gall’s lecture had ever read anything about phrenology. Thus, insofar as the explanation of these phenomena turn on the assumption that there is LF-movement, and insofar as LF-movement is sensitive to whether phrases are quantificational, then it follows that the, at least on the uses exemplified in the above examples, is a quantifier, as otherwise we would expect to find quite a different complex of properties.\(^{36}\)

But is it true that Frege cannot account for these properties of ‘the’? Can, for example, Frege account for quantification into definite descriptions, as in May’s example (13)?

(13) Every man admires the woman he loves.

I do not see why not. Frege could say that (13) is true just in case the open sentence

\[ x \text{ admires the woman } x \text{ loves} \]

\(^{34}\) See Schiffer (2003a), Ch. 5.

\(^{35}\) Reimer (1992).

is both true of every man and, for every \( y \), true or false of \( y \) only if there is one and only one woman \( y \) loves. This second conjunct would, by the Fregean criterion for being a singular term, make substitution instances of ‘the woman \( x \) loves’ singular terms. Still, these issues are deep and complicated, and I cannot hope even to attempt to resolve them here. I shall touch on this again in the conclusion.

4. The crux of the standard Russellian response to the problem posed by referential cases is its claim that the truth of the Russellian theory helps to explain why speakers can and do use ‘The \( F \) is \( G \)’ to mean non-descriptive, object-dependent propositions. This claim is not plausible. Consider a typical case in which in uttering a sentence \( \sigma \) the speaker says one proposition \( p \) and also means, but does not say, another proposition \( q \) (that is, while the speaker means both \( p \) and \( q \), only \( p \) conforms to the character\(^*\) of \( \sigma \)). It is mutual knowledge between professors \( X \) and \( Y \) that they have a very important department meeting at two o’clock and that \( Y \) tends to lose track of time. \( X \) goes to \( Y \)’s office and says to him, ‘It’s two o’clock’, and in uttering that sentence both says that it is two o’clock and also means that the meeting is starting. In this typical sort of case, \( X \) means that the meeting is starting by saying that it is two o’clock. \( Y \) knows that \( X \) meant that the meeting was starting on the basis of knowing that \( X \) said that it was two o’clock. Given the account of the character\(^*\) relation proposed in section 2, we should expect the information-processing sequence that begins with \( Y \)’s perception of \( X \)’s utterance and ends with \( Y \)’s believing that \( X \) meant that the meeting was starting to satisfy the following partial characterization:

> Perception of \( X \)’s utterance of ‘It’s two o’clock’ ➔ syntactic representation of sentence ➔ interaction of that representation with representation of compositional character\(^*\) theory ➔ representation of sentence’s character\(^*\) ➔ interaction of that representation with background mutual knowledge ➔ belief that \( X \) said that it was two o’clock ➔ interaction of that belief with background mutual knowledge ➔ belief that \( X \) meant that the meeting was starting.

Let us call this way of saying one thing and meaning another the say-\( p \)-mean-\( q \) model; it is arguably also exemplified in the above example in which in uttering ‘Alice got pregnant and married Bob’, the speaker says that Alice got pregnant and married Bob and also means that Alice first got pregnant and then married Bob. The standard Russellian

\[ \text{See also Salmon (2002), pp. 534–5, n. 47.} \]
response to the problem of referential uses of definite descriptions is best understood as the claim that referential utterances of ‘The F is G’ exemplify the say-\( p \rightarrow q \) model.\(^{38}\) For example, in uttering ‘Smith’s murderer is insane’ the speaker says that Smith’s murderer is insane and, at least partly on the basis of that, also means, of Jones, the erratically behaving defendant, that she is insane.

One problem with this intended application of the say-\( p \rightarrow q \) model is that often when a speaker’s utterance of ‘The F is G’ is referential, she seems not to be determinately or even indeterminately saying any descriptive proposition. As I said in my gloss of ‘He’ Scenario, I, the speaker in that scenario, did not seem either determinately or indeterminately to mean any descriptive proposition in uttering ‘He’s deranged’, and my utterance of ‘The guy’s deranged’ in ‘The Guy’ Scenario did not seem to differ relevantly on this score. My communicative intentions were the same in both utterances. The proponent of the standard response to the referential-use problem must therefore argue (given the character* theory of meaning) either (a) that some descriptive proposition was determinately or indeterminately meant even in ‘He’ Scenario, or (b) that notwithstanding the psychological parity between the two cases, there is a relevant difference by virtue of which a descriptive proposition was indeterminately (or determinately) meant in ‘The Guy’ Scenario even though none was meant in ‘He’ Scenario, or (c) that my stipulation that there was psychological parity (as regards my communicative intentions) does not cohere with the assumption that my utterance of ‘The guy’s deranged’ constituted a normal referential use of ‘the guy’, or (d) that the utterance in ‘The Guy’ Scenario was not literal, in that no proposition conforming to the character* of ‘The guy’s deranged’ was meant.

There is no intuitive basis for (a), given that the object-dependent proposition I said was not also a descriptive proposition. It seems plain to me that no such descriptive proposition was determinately meant, and if some were indeterminately meant, which of the numerous descriptive propositions potentially in play were indeterminately meant? Or is it that none was even determinately indeterminately meant? Most Russelians who advocate the standard response hold that singular pronouns used referentially, as ‘he’ is used in ‘He’ Scenario, function as what Gareth Evans called Russellian singular terms\(^{39}\)—singular terms that make the semantic contents of the utterances in which

\(^{38}\) See Stephen Neale’s (1990) gloss of the implicature reasoning demanded by what he calls Grice’s Justification Requirement, pp. 78 and 89.

\(^{39}\) Evans (1982).
they occur dependent for their existence on the referents of those singular terms, and these theorists have a special motive for not accepting (a). If they were to hold that descriptive propositions were also meant in these utterances, then they would evidently be committed to saying, roughly speaking, that the same things would be meant whether one uttered ‘He is G’ or ‘The male is G’, and in that case there would seem not to be any reasonable basis for attributing different characters* to the two sentences. They would be constrained to say that ‘he’ meant the same as ‘the male’. In this regard one should keep in mind that pronouns like ‘he’ have attributive uses, as when one points to a huge footprint in the sand and says ‘He must be a giant’, meaning thereby that the man who made the print, whoever he may be, must be a giant.40 It seems clear that (a) is not a viable option.

The anti-Gricean thought behind (b) is that what a speaker means in uttering a sentence may supervene partly on the meaning of the sentence she utters. On a Gricean account of speaker-meaning, what a speaker means in uttering a sentence σ depends only on communicative intentions whose contents are specifiable without reference to the meaning of σ. So someone who took the tack implied by (b) would argue that even though the communicative intentions I, the speaker, had in ‘He’ Scenario do not entail that I indeterminately meant any descriptive proposition in uttering ‘He’s deranged’, those same intentions, manifested again in ‘The Guy’ Scenario, together with the fact that ‘The guy’s deranged’ has its description-theoretic character*, do entail that I indeterminately meant certain descriptive propositions. It is because those descriptive propositions conform to the character* of ‘The guy’s deranged’ that my utterance was literal, whereas my utterance of ‘He’s deranged’ in ‘He’ Scenario counts as literal because I meant the Abe-dependent proposition, and it conformed to the character* of the uttered sentence.

If (b) or (c) were correct, one should expect the claim that I meant a descriptive proposition in the second scenario to be more intuitively plausible than the claim that I meant such a proposition in the first scenario, and, moreover, the plausibility of such an attribution of speaker-meaning should carry with it some intuitive basis for saying which of the numerous descriptive propositions in play were indeterminately meant. I can find no such intuitive difference, and nor can the non-philosophers I have consulted (for whatever that is worth). Related to this lack of intuitive difference is another problem. The claim that in a referential utterance of ‘The F is G’ the speaker is inde-

40See Schiffer (1995) and Evans (1982); I believe I got the footprint example from Evans.
terminately saying two or more descriptive propositions is incompati-
ble with a very strong intuition we have about the truth conditions of
such utterances—namely, that a speaker’s referential utterance of ‘The
F is G’ is determinately true if the F to which she refers is G. In ‘The
Guy’ Scenario, for example, my utterance is determinately true if Abe,
the man to whom I referred, is deranged. But suppose that in uttering
‘The guy’s deranged’ it is indeterminate whether I said that the only
guy rapidly approaching us is deranged or that the only guy before us
who is screaming that the end of the world is nigh is deranged or that
the only bearded person in sight wearing a pink fuzzy bathrobe and a Prince-
ton cap is deranged or .... Then my utterance will not be determinately
true if just one of those propositions is false. Suppose, for example,
that the man is not bearded but is merely wearing a fake beard. Then I
will have failed to make a determinately true statement in uttering
‘The guy’s deranged’, even though the man to whom I referred was
deranged. That, I submit, is very counterintuitive. Note that the prob-
lems here being rehearsed are not problems for claims about indeter-
minacy of semantic content either in attributive utterances involving
incomplete definite descriptions or in utterances involving incom-
plete indefinite descriptions. When in these cases no one proposition
is determinately the proposition I said, then it will seem intuitively
correct that it is to some degree indeterminate what I said, and if in
such intentions some of the propositions I indeterminately said are
true while others are false, then it will seem intuitively correct to say
that my utterance lacks a determinate truth-value. Suppose, for ex-
ample, I say ‘No one failed’, thinking that everyone who passed the final
also passed the course, and it is neither determinately true that I said
that no one failed the final nor determinately true that I said that no
one failed the course, where these are the only two salient propositions
in play as candidates for what I said. Then, assuming no surprises in
the complete description of the example, I will have indeterminately
said both of those propositions, which is to say that it will be indeter-
minate whether I said either one of them. Now suppose that my belief
that everyone who passed the course also passed the final is false: my TA
did the grading, and I forgot that while everyone did pass the course,
one person failed the final. Then there will be little temptation to say
that my utterance was either determinately true or determinately false.
Nor is it difficult to account for the relevant difference between these
cases and referential utterances of definite descriptions, such as my
utterance of ‘The guy’s deranged’ in ‘The Guy’ scenario. In both kinds
of cases, the speaker clearly has communicative cases, but in the refer-
ential intentions those intentions are all focused on the non-descriptive object-dependent proposition the speaker means; the descriptive propositions in the offing are in the offing merely as by-products of the speaker’s intention to communicate about the thing to which she is referring, and the descriptive propositions in the offing are in the offing merely by virtue of involving uniquely identifying descriptions that the speaker and her audience mutually know the referent to satisfy. By contrast, in the former cases there is no other kind of proposition in play other than ones involving definite or indefinite descriptions; they are seen clearly to be the objects of the speaker’s communicative intentions, because there is in these cases no other kind of proposition to be the focus of those intentions. The fact that indeterminacy of content distributed among the kinds of propositions postulated by Russell’s theory of descriptions is plausible in the case of utterances involving indefinite descriptions or attributively used definite descriptions gives no support to the claim that the same kind of indeterminacy is plausible as regards utterances involving referentially used definite descriptions.

There are a few problems with (d). ‘The Guy’ Scenario is entirely typical of referential uses of definite descriptions, so if no descriptive proposition was determinately or indeterminately meant there, then it will be in only atypical referential uses that descriptive propositions are in any way meant. If the Russellian theory were true of the typical cases and yet no proposition was meant in them which conformed to the characters* of the sentences uttered, then all these referential uses would in that sense be non-literal. But they do not strike us in that way. They seem like perfectly straightforward uses of ‘The F is G’, and there is no sense that in these cases we are not using the words we utter with meanings they have. It seems preposterous to deny that your saying to your spouse ‘The car needs to be serviced’ is an entirely literal and straightforward use of those words. A second problem is that given the way meaning supervenes on use, we should expect that even if ‘The F is G’ originally had only a Russellian, description-theoretic character*, it would by now have acquired a secondary meaning, another character*, in line with the referential uses. Think of the use of ‘foot’ as a unit of measurement or of ‘mouse’ as a computer device. Several philosophers have emphasized this point,41 and Stephen Neale nicely summarizes its expression in writings by Michael Devitt and by

41 For example, Kripke (1979): ‘I find it plausible that a diachronic account of the evolution of language is likely to suggest that what was originally a mere speaker’s reference may, if it becomes habitual in a community, evolve into a semantic reference’ (p. 22).
Marga Reimer:42 ‘referential uses of descriptions are common, standard, regular, systematic, and cross-linguistic; indeed so much so that it would be a bit rich to deny that such uses are ... a direct function of linguistic meaning in a way that referential uses of other quantified DPs are not’.43 A third problem is a corollary of the first two. If (d) were correct, we should expect that the Russellian character* of ‘The guy’s deranged’ played an essential role in my ability to mean the Abe-dependent proposition I meant in ‘The Guy’ Scenario. In clear cases in which the only proposition meant in uttering a sentence does not conform to the sentence’s character*, the sentence’s character* nevertheless plays an essential explanatory role in the account of how one’s hearer was able to know what one meant. Think of an utterance of ‘I would rather have needles stuck in my eyes’ in response to the question whether the speaker would like to go out with Harold. The account of the character* relation I proposed earlier suggests that a representation linking the sentence uttered with its character* in a language is always operative when speakers of the language communicate with one another using that sentence, whether or not they mean something that conforms to the character*. Quite frankly, I cannot think of a remotely plausible account of how a Russellian character* would enter into the processing that resulted in a hearer’s knowing what was meant in all those referential cases if no descriptive proposition was also meant.

5. Another problem with the claim that the say-\(p \rightarrow q\)-mean-\(q\) model explains referential uses of definite descriptions is that for the model to apply, the hearer must know the speaker meant the non-descriptive object-dependent proposition on the basis of knowing that she determinately or indeterminately said a descriptive proposition. But if in ‘The Guy’ Scenario I did indeterminately mean some descriptive propositions, then it seems more plausible that you were able to infer which ones I indeterminately meant on the basis of knowing that I meant the non-descriptive Abe-dependent proposition. For how could you even know which of Abe’s myriad uniqueness properties were potentially in play as components of a said descriptive proposition unless you first knew that I was referring to him in my utterance, and so meant some proposition about him? When a definite description is used referentially, a hearer cannot even identify candidate descriptive propositions except on the basis of knowing that to which the speaker was referring.

in uttering the definite description, and this is incompatible with the
claim that the Russelian theory explains the referential uses. True, if the
sole character* of ‘The $F$ is $G$’ were as the theory requires it to be, then
referential uses of the sentence would be explained by the say-$p$-mean-$q$ model. The fact that they are not explained by the model
implies that the character* of ‘The $F$ is $G$’ which is operative in referen-
tial cases is not as the Russelian theory requires it to be.

If the account I suggested in section 2 of the character* relation is
correct, then it is naive to suppose the issue being joined can be
resolved by any sort of direct intuition about the semantic contents of
utterances of sentences containing definite descriptions, for claims
about semantic content entail claims about meaning and those claims,
on my account of the character* relation, entail claims about the repre-
sentations employed in the information processing that constitutes lan-
guage understanding, and the final resolution of those claims can be
achieved only by scientific theory and empirical investigation. At the
same time, that account does not preclude our having indirect evidence
favouring one or another hypothesis about the information-processing
that underlies our understanding utterances of those sentences, and I
submit that the sort of evidence just cited makes implausible the sort of
information-processing story that would have to be true if the standard
Russellian response to the referential-use problem were correct.

6. Another Russellian response to the problem

At the beginning of the preceding section, I pointed out that the Russel-
lian’s response to the problem posed by referential uses of definite
descriptions must be to claim that the object-dependent proposition
the speaker means in a referential utterance of ‘The $F$ is $G$’ either (i) is
not a descriptive proposition and therefore does not conform to the
sentence’s character* or (ii) is a descriptive proposition and therefore
does conform to the sentence’s character*. Almost all contemporary
Russellians accept (i). The standard Russellian response to the referen-
tial-use problem presupposes (i), and it is difficult to see how a Russel-
lian who accepts (i) can have any other response. I gave my reasons for
rejecting that solution in the preceding section. Now there is an obvi-
ous way to accept (ii); it is to hold that the proposition expressed in a
referential utterance of ‘The $F$ is $G$’ is the proposition expressed by

$$[\text{the}_x; Fx \land x = a] \ x \text{ is } G,$$
where \( a \) refers to the \( F \) to which the speaker was referring in her utterance of ‘the \( F \).

Logical space contains the (ii) way of being a Russellian, but I know of only one Russellian who actually occupies it. For a long time Stephen Neale accepted (i) and was a leading advocate of the standard response, but he has recently changed his mind, and in his latest publication on these issues he argues for (ii).\(^4^4\) According to what Neale would now say, the proposition I both mean and say in ‘The Guy’ Scenario is the proposition expressed by

\[
[\text{the}_{x} \text{ guy } x \land x = \text{Abe}] \text{ is deranged.}
\]

Neale mentions four advantages of this approach over the standard Russellian response, which presupposes (i).

First, it enables the Russellian to avoid having to say that in cases like ‘The Guy’ Scenario the speaker did not determinately mean any descriptive proposition but either said no descriptive proposition at all or else indeterminately said each of myriad descriptive propositions. Now, Neale implies, there is just a single descriptive proposition the speaker determinately meant and determinately said: the object-dependent proposition involving the thing to which the speaker referred in her referential use of the definite description she uttered. If this response avoids indeterminacy, then it also avoids the truth-condition problem mentioned in the preceding section which turns on indeterminacy.

Second, it promises to avoid a problem I raised in Schiffer (1995) and which I briefly sketched in the preceding section. The problem was presented in this article as a dilemma for the Russellian who wants to combine her Russellian account of definite descriptions with a direct-reference account of single word pronouns and demonstratives. Neale puts the dilemma I raised and his possible solution to it as follows (I have substituted the running examples of this paper, the utterances in ‘He’ and ‘The Guy’ Scenarios, for the example I used in Schiffer (1995), which Neale discusses, only now we should take Neale to be the speaker in both scenarios):

[Schiffer] says the Russellian has no good basis for preferring a direct-reference theory of my use of ‘he’ to a theory that treats it as an incomplete description with more or less the same content as my use of ‘the guy’. This is because in the two cases under consideration [Neale’s utterance of ‘He’s deranged’ in ‘He’ Scenario and his utterance of ‘The guy’s deranged’ in ‘The Guy’ Scenario] there would be no discernible difference in my communica-

\(^4^4\) Neale (2004).
tive intentions, and these intentions are the only psychological states relevant to determining what I would have meant by my utterance—what I would say is part of what I would mean, so it would be backed by a communicative intention. The Russellian must, it would seem, either (a) deny that my demonstrative use of ‘he’ is directly referential (and offer an alternative treatment, presumably description-based), or (b) deny the claim of indiscernible communicative intentions, or (c) deny that psychological facts alone determine the issue of what I meant. (a) might have some plausibility. My use of the demonstrative pronoun ‘he’ might be interpreted as equivalent to a description we interpret as \[\text{the}_x: \text{male } x \land x = a\], where \(a\) refers directly to Abe. Thus, a formal representation of the truth conditions of my utterance of ‘he’s deranged’ might be given by:

\[\text{the}_x: \text{male } x \land x = a\] \(x\) is deranged.

I am inclined to think this would be a more plausible line of defence than (b) or (c), but more would need to be said about the relationship between formal representations of truth conditions, the LFs [logical forms] of English sentences, and the thoughts we seek to convey.\(^45\)

Third, it enables the Russellian to avoid the very implausible claim that referential uses of definite descriptions, unlike their attributive uses, are not a direct function of linguistic meaning. On Neale’s new proposal, the object-dependent proposition one means in a referential use conforms to the character\(^*\) of the sentence uttered. The Russellian can account for the referential cases without appeal to Gricean pragmatics.

Fourth, it gives the Russellian a reply to an objection I have not yet considered: ‘a number of philosophers and linguists have argued that some occurrences of definite descriptions function as bound variables and hence as referential expressions, which if true would create a problem for a unitary Russellian analysis.’\(^46\) Consider the following example that Neale cites from Wilson (1991):

\begin{quote}
(14) Every scientist who was fired from the observatory at Sofia was consoled by someone who knew him as a youth.
\end{quote}

According to a widely-held view, the italicized pronoun in (14) is a variable bound by the quantifier phrase ‘every scientist who was fired from the observatory at Sofia’. If that is correct, then parity of reasoning suggests that the italicized description in

\begin{quote}
(15) Every scientist who was fired from the observatory at Sofia was consoled by someone who knew the fired scientist as a youth
\end{quote}


is also functioning as a bound variable. Neale’s new account allows him to deny that the description is no more a bound variable in (15) than it is in

Every man likes the woman who kissed him,

where the ‘the woman who kissed him’ is not a bound variable but rather contains a pronoun that is a bound variable. For according to Neale, (16) gives a correct representation of (15)’s truth conditions, thus revealing ‘the fired scientist’ in (15) as going proxy for the bound-into description ‘the fired scientist who is identical to x’.

(16) \[ \text{every} x: \text{scientist } x \land x \text{ was fired from the observatory at Sofia} \]
\[ \text{the} z: \text{fired scientist } z \land z = x \]
\[ \text{some} y: \text{y knew } z \text{ as a youth} \]
\[ (x \text{ was consoled by } y) \]

‘In short’, Neale concludes, ‘the Russelian says that the incomplete description in ((15)) is not, pace Wilson, a bound variable, but just another incomplete or elliptical description in need of pragmatic enrichment—one for which the speaker could provide a fuller description that is bound-into, that is, a description containing a bound pronoun. It is an incomplete, relativized description whose natural completion contains an expression understood as a variable bound by the subject expression’. But if, as Neale also suggests, pronouns are, as it were, really disguised incomplete definite descriptions (‘he’ means the same as ‘the male’), then it should follow that pronouns themselves never function as bound variables but only as bound-into descriptions, and that therefore the correct representation of (14)’s truth conditions should be the same as (15)’s—namely, (16)—only with ‘[the} z: \text{male } z \land z = x\]’ replacing ‘[the} z: \text{fired scientist } z \land z = x\]’. Neale does not shrink from this commitment and even finds merit in what he calls ‘this seeming madness’:

First, it would allow for the possibility of incomplete bound pronouns, which may have some explanatory value. Second, it would make it much easier to explain the raising of pronouns assuming [a certain DP analysis he gives earlier in his article]. Third, it would yield (trivially) a ‘uniform theory’ of anaphoric pronouns, something many semanticists crave, via a uniform blueprint …. Of course whether an occurrence of ‘he’ always makes this richer contribution to what is said is debatable. There is more than one way to skin a cat.

There are problems with this alternative Russellian response to the referential-use problem.

a. It is not clear that it yields a determinate statement with determinate truth conditions, and therefore not clear that it avoids the indeterminacy problems that beset the standard Russellian response. It certainly does not avoid this just by building the referent into the proposition that is said. I say to you ‘The guy’s deranged’. According to Neale’s new proposal, the descriptive proposition I meant and said is the one represented by

\[ \textit{the}_x \textit{ guy } x \land x = \textit{Abe} \] \( x \) is deranged.

But what secures that that is the proposition I meant, as opposed, say, to the proposition represented by the following representation?

\[ \textit{the}_x \textit{ bearded guy in the pink bathrobe approaching us } x \land x = \textit{Abe} \] \( x \) is deranged.

Neale implies that the meaning-determining convention governing referential uses of ‘The F is G’ requires the literal speaker to mean that the F that is identical to \( \alpha \) is G, where \( \alpha \) is the thing to which the speaker refers by her utterance of ‘the F’. At the same time, Neale is Gricean enough to accept that what a speaker means in uttering a sentence is determined by her communicative intentions, and I can see no principled basis on which to secure that the descriptive proposition meant, assuming there is one, will contain no more descriptive material than is directly expressed by the incomplete description that is uttered. Imagining myself as the speaker, I cannot find a principled basis on which to make just one of the numerous de re uniqueness properties potentially in play as the one that enters into the proposition I meant. But if there is no such principled basis, then Neale cannot reasonably claim that the meaning of ‘The guy’s deranged’ precludes a referential utterance of it from having the same semantic content as a referential utterance of, say, ‘The guy over there is deranged’. It would be plausible that the meaning of ‘The guy is deranged’ constrains the literal speaker to mean that the guy who is identical to \( \alpha \) is deranged only if that proposition were not on a par as regards the speaker’s communicative intentions with numerous other propositions like it but for their containing a bit more descriptive matter. Now, the most serious indeterminacy problem is not avoided if utterances of ‘The guy’s deranged’ and ‘The guy over there is deranged’ can have the same semantic content. For if they can have the same semantic content, then in any referential utterance of ‘The F is G’, there
will always be many propositions of the form \textit{the thing that is $H$ and $F$ and identical to $\alpha$ is $G$} which are equally good candidates for what is said. What makes this sort of indeterminacy so insidious is the way it affects truth conditions: as we saw above, if each of several descriptive propositions is indeterminately meant, then I will not have meant something determinately true if just one of those propositions is false. That possibility does not seem to cohere with our intuitions about the truth conditions of the object-dependent propositions the speaker \textit{meant} in such cases, whether or not what she meant is also what she said. I should think that in a referential utterance of \textit{‘The guy’s deranged’} the proposition I meant is determinately true if the guy to whom I referred in uttering the sentence is deranged.

\textit{b.} There is a truth-conditions problem quite apart from anything about indeterminacy. The problem most clearly emerges, in the first instance, as a problem for Neale’s proposal that ‘he’ means the same as ‘the male’, understood \textit{à la} Russell. For consider again my utterance of ‘He’s deranged’ in \textit{‘He’ Scenario}, Abe, as before, the person to whom I referred by my utterance of ‘he’, and suppose that sex change is literally possible. Is the Abe-dependent proposition I meant in uttering ‘He’s deranged’ true in a possible world in which Abe is deranged but no longer male? Neale must answer no, because the proposition I meant is the proposition \textit{that the male who is identical to Abe is deranged}, and that proposition is true in any possible world $w$ only if Abe is male in $w$. But Neale’s commitment is clearly not motivated by what seems \textit{intuitively correct} (it will not strike the uncommitted as intuitively correct), and in fact the following observation suggests that it is incorrect. Consider a referential utterance of

It might have been the case that he was female, where the speaker refers to Abe. Here, I submit, it does seem reasonably clear that there is no reading of this utterance on which it is false, given that sex change is possible. Yet it would seem that Neale has to say that there is a scope ambiguity and that on one reading it is false. The two readings, with their truth-values, would be:

\begin{itemize}
  \item [T] The male who is identical to Abe is such that he might have been female.
  \item [F] The proposition \textit{that the male who is identical to Abe is female} is such that it might have been true.
\end{itemize}
Although the problem just rehearsed most clearly arises for ‘he’, it does seem to me that the same problem arises for a referential utterance of

It might have been the case that the man was female, but the intuitive correctness of this claim might be obscured by the fact that attributive utterances of ‘It might have been the case that the F is G’ do display a scope ambiguity.

There are at least two replies to the foregoing objection which Neale might try. First, he might claim that definite descriptions and pronouns like ‘he’ must always take wide scope in modal contexts when used referentially in those contexts. But such a claim would have to be motivated, and it is simply not clear what motivation could be given for it which was not ad hoc. Second, Neale might claim that the meaning-determining convention governing referential uses of ‘the F’ requires the speaker to mean that the ACTUAL-F that is identical to \( \alpha \) is \( G \), where \( \alpha \) is the thing to which the speaker referred by her utterance of ‘the F’ and ‘ACTUAL’ is used as a term of art which expresses an operator whose effect is to make the proposition that the ACTUAL-F that is identical to \( \alpha \) is \( G \) true in an arbitrary possible world \( w \) just in case \( \alpha \) is \( F \) in the actual world and \( G \) in \( w \). One problem with this response is that the concept of the ACTUALITY operator is pretty sophisticated, and one might reasonably doubt that it belongs to the conceptual repertoire of young children and other non-philosophers. A second problem is due to Scott Soames,\(^9\) and may be restated as follows. Suppose that, referring to Britney Spears, you say ‘She is no longer married’, and I reply ‘I’d believe what you said if I didn’t think it was based on wishful thinking’. It seems obvious that my statement might be literally true, yet it is difficult to see how it could be if, as the reply in question would have it, the semantic content of your utterance is the proposition that the ACTUAL-female who is identical to Britney is no longer married. For given the modal status of my statement, it can be true only if I could believe it even were my actual world other than it actually is, and it is very difficult to see how anyone whose actual world was that other world could have beliefs about the world that is in fact actual for us. It would seem that in believing the proposition you asserted in uttering ‘She is no longer married’, I would not be required to have beliefs about a particular possible world that was not the world in which I believed what you said.

c. There is a problem of psychological plausibility: it is not psychologically plausible that an ordinary speaker—perhaps a five-year-old child or a poorly educated adult—means of the Atlantic Ocean that the ocean that is identical to it is cold when she says at the beach, referring to the Atlantic Ocean, ‘The ocean is cold’. The thought, of the Atlantic Ocean, that the ocean that is identical to it is cold is a pretty sophisticated and complex thought, given the way in which the concept of identity enters into it, and there is no intuitive basis for thinking that it is the thought an ordinary speaker intends to convey to her audience when she says, ‘The ocean is cold’. If asked to be fully explicit about what she meant, no ordinary speaker would use a that-clause which explicitly invokes the notion of identity. Here I must hasten to add that I am fully aware of the paradox of analysis. That does nothing to vitiate my point. Even if Grice’s account of speaker-meaning were correct, it would be psychologically implausible to suppose that the thought expressed by an utterance of ‘Paul meant that it was raining’ was identical to the thought that Paul uttered something with the intention of producing in his hearer the belief that it was raining by means of her, the hearer’s, recognition of his intention to produce in her the belief that it was raining, but there is nothing psychologically implausible about the claim that the two propositions are truth-conditionally equivalent. It is evidently crucial to the non-standard Russelian response to the referential-use problem that the proposition the speaker means in a referential utterance of ‘The F is G’ is the proposition that the F that is identical to α is G, where α is the thing to which the speaker referred in his referential utterance of ‘the F’.

d. This problem is one to which Neale should be especially sensitive. In his discussion, quoted above, about the semantic similarities between ‘he’ and ‘the male’, Neale recognizes the implausibility of giving a direct-reference account of the semantic content of his utterance of ‘He’s deranged’ (‘he’ being used to refer to Abe) and a Russelian description-theoretic account of the semantic content of his utterance of ‘The guy’s deranged’ (‘the guy’ being used to refer to Abe), given that his communicative intentions were the same in both utterances. Neale’s solution is to extend his Russelian account of referential uses of incomplete definite descriptions to single-word pronouns. What is expressed in a referential use of ‘the guy’ is what would be more explicitly expressed by

30Grice (1989a).

\[ \text{[the}_x\text{ guy } x \land x = a], \]

where \( a \) directly refers to the thing to which the speaker was referring in her referential use of ‘the guy’, and what is expressed in a referential use of ‘he’ is what would be more explicitly expressed by

\[ \text{[the}_x\text{ male } x \land x = a], \]

where \( a \) directly refers to the thing to which the speaker was referring in her referential use of ‘he’. What about ‘it’? Neale might say that on a referential use it goes proxy for

\[ \text{[the}_x\text{ thing } x \land x = a], \]

where \( a \) directly refers to the thing to which the speaker was referring in her referential use of ‘it’, or he might say that each time ‘it’ is used referentially, there is some contextually determined property expressed by a predicate \( \Phi \) such that the referential use goes proxy for

\[ \text{[the}_x\text{ } \Phi x \land x = a], \]

where \( a \) is again the referent of ‘it’ (it is more difficult to conjecture what he would say about pronouns like ‘I’ and ‘you’). The problem is that by this line of reasoning there are no singular terms: every ostensible singular term turns out to be an incomplete definite description, and thus a restricted quantifier phrase, in disguise. In the example from my (1995) paper which Neale discusses, you and I are in the audience waiting to hear a talk by the distinguished philosopher Ferdinand Pergola. The great man finally stumbles into the room and begins talking to his audience in a slurred voice. I turn to you and say, ‘The guy’s drunk’. But I might have said without any change in communicative intentions either ‘He’s drunk’ or ‘Pergola’s drunk’. If, as regards pronouns, that possibility shows that the semantic content of the hypothetical utterance of ‘He’s drunk’ is the same as the semantic content of the utterance of ‘The guy’s drunk’, then, as regards names, it should show that the semantic content of the hypothetical utterance of ‘Pergola’s drunk’ is also the same as that of the utterance of ‘The guy’s drunk’. Whatever reason there is to think that pronouns are restricted quantifiers in their referential uses is also a reason to reach the same conclusion about proper names, and, we can add, the same goes for single-word demonstratives.

Well, what is wrong with saying that all ostensible singular terms are disguised definite descriptions? Russell himself said something very close to that. Why is a commitment to it a problem? One reason it is a problem—aside from the reasons just listed—is that without singular
terms we shall have no way explicitly to express the thoughts we communicate in the referential uses of ostensible singular terms. This is especially problematic if we think in a neural system of mental representation, a language of thought. If Mentalese is to have formulae that directly express the contents we think, it will need genuine singular terms. And what a mystery it would be if Mentalese singular terms could not have public language counterparts. I also suspect that if we deny that natural languages have singular terms, our grammatical theory of the relation between surface form and logical form will be considerably more complicated than if the terms we suppose to be singular terms really are.

7. Summary and concluding remarks

The issue addressed by Russell’s theory of definite descriptions is about the meanings of sentences containing definite descriptions, and meanings are best construed as characters*. But being a character* is a relational property of the things that have it—to be a character* is to stand in a certain relation to some other thing—and therefore we were motivated to inquire into the nature of the character* relation, that relation that must obtain between two things in order for one to be a character* of the other. It is supposed to be a platitude that the meaning relation—now the character* relation—needs to be explicated in terms of conventional regularities in linguistic behaviour, but in fact it cannot be so explicated. An account in terms of conventional behaviour is ultimately an account in terms of propositional attitudes, and the character* relation cannot be explicated wholly in terms of propositional attitudes. This is because an account of the character* relation presupposes an account of the actual-language relation, and we cannot say what it is for a person to use a language just in terms of that person’s propositional attitudes. I suggested that we can account for the character* relation in terms of the information processing that underlies language understanding. More specifically, the character* of a complete sentence type (‘The F is G,’ as opposed to ‘the F is G’) is an ordered pair <A, P>, where A is a type of speech act and P a kind of proposition, and the processing that takes one from the perception of the utterance of a sentence to the knowledge of what the speaker said in producing that utterance will involve a processing state that represents the sentence as directly or indirectly linked with its character*. To speculate about the character* of a sentence is therefore to speculate about the sub-doxastic information-processing states. It is naive to think that is something
about which anyone can have ‘direct intuitions’, but there is plenty of indirect evidence to be marshalled.

In its best guise, a Russellian theory of definite descriptions holds that definite descriptions are restricted quantifier phrases, and that the propositional component of the character* of ‘The F is G’ is the kind of proposition to which all and only propositions of the form the thing that is uniquely H and F is G belong, a proposition of this form being true in a possible world w just in case in w something is both uniquely H and F and also G. The theory is challenged by referential uses of definite descriptions, for it would seem that what one says in a referential use of a definite description is an object-dependent non-descriptive proposition.

It is obvious that speakers mean object-dependent propositions in their referential uses of definite descriptions. The Russellian has two options by way of response. The first is to concede that the object-dependent propositions are not descriptive propositions and then to argue that while those propositions are meant, they are not also said, that is, do not conform to the characters* of the sentences uttered. It is incumbent upon the Russellian who takes this line to say what, if anything, is said in those referential utterances and to explain why the practice of using definite descriptions referentially is so ubiquitous. The second option is to argue that the object-dependent propositions are descriptive propositions. It would seem that the only way to take this option is to argue that in a referential utterance of ‘The F is G’ the descriptive proposition the speaker both means and says is, roughly speaking, that the F that is identical to a is G, where a is the thing to which the speaker refers in uttering ‘the F’.

The first option is the standard response of contemporary Russelli-
ans, and I have given a few reasons for thinking that it is not a good response. The second option, a clear position in logical space, is oc-
cupied, so far as I know, only by Stephen Neale, who in his previous publica-
tions on this topic argued for the standard response. I gave reasons for thinking that this option is also not a good response.

So I conclude that the Russellian theory is not the correct account for all uses of definite descriptions: it cannot accommodate referential uses of definite descriptions.

Does the Russellian theory at least give a correct account of the char-
acter* of “The F is G” which is operative in attributive utterances? If not, what sort of character* governs attributive utterances? Is it the same as the one governing referential utterances? If the Russellian theory does give a correct account of the character* governing attributive uses, then
does ‘The $F$ is $G$’ have two characters*, or is there one character* that governs both referential and attributive uses?

As I said in section 2, I am inclined to think that ‘The $F$ is $G$’ is ambiguous, does have two characters*, if the Russellian theory gives the correct account of the operative character* in attributive utterances. For in that case, ‘the $F$’ can occur either as a quantifier phrase or as a singular term, and while there may well be a single kind of proposition whose members are all and only those assertable in literal utterances of ‘The $F$ is $G$’, the fact that the sentence’s surface form would be underlain by two such disparate logical forms would I think strongly suggest that two distinct characters* attach to the one surface form, ‘The $F$ is $G$’. But, as I also said in section 2, I for one am not confident that the Russellian theory is correct even for the attributive cases. Freges’s theory, according to which definite descriptions in subject position are always singular terms, is unthreatened by attributive uses, and, while I shall not now pursue the issue, I also think a single univocal character* will accommodate both referential and attributive utterances of ‘The $F$ is $G$’, if ‘the $F$’ functions as a singular term in both cases—that is to say, if in both cases no true or false proposition is expressed if ‘the $F$’ fails to refer. But I do not think we are in a position to say that any theory that is like Frege’s in that respect is determinately false. Nor do I think that we are in a position to say that any such theory is determinately true. The issue, for all we so far know, may be indeterminate. Consider the proposition that Prince Harry’s first child will be a girl, and suppose that Prince Harry never has a child. Would the proposition then be false or neither true nor false? I do not see that this question enjoys a determinate answer, and if that is so, then it is indeterminate whether ‘Prince Harry’s first child’ functions as a singular term or a restricted quantifier phrase in the sentence ‘Prince Harry’s first child will be a girl’.

But does my information-processing account of the character* relation not commit me to the possibility of an empirical resolution? No, unfortunately. It is possible that a fully complete and correct information-processing theory of language understanding would resolve the issue, but there is no guarantee of that. It may be indeterminate what propositions are represented by crucial information-processing states; it may be determinate what propositions are represented but indeterminate what the truth and falsity conditions of those propositions are; or it may be indeterminate what the formal representational features of those states are. Philosophers, linguists, and psychologists need to continue wrestling with the questions Bertrand Russell raised one hundred years ago.51

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