A Defense of Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions by Using Soamesian Apparatus against the Problem Arising from Incomplete Definite Descriptions

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[**Abstract:** According to Bertrand Russell a non-compound sentence containing an incomplete definite description always expresses a false proposition. This feature of his theory has given the birth of an objection to Russell's theory of definite descriptions. The objection is the following: a competent speaker often succeeds to assert something true by using a non-compound sentence containing an incomplete definite description, and Russell's theory fails to account for this phenomenon; hence, Russell's theory is not a correct theory. In order to defend Russell's theory against the above mentioned objection, in the present paper, I have used Scott Soames' Alternative Picture of meaning and assertion instead of using the traditional view concerning them. Here, I have argued that the aforementioned objection does not really pose a serious threat to Russell's theory as the objection concerns an issue of pragmatics and not of semantics whereas Russell's theory is a theory that concerns semantics.]

Introduction:

Since the twentieth century, the meaning and truth condition of a sentence has become an interesting topic in the history of Philosophy of Language. One of the most prevalent and famous philosophers of that time is Bertrand Russell. Though his famous article "On Denoting" published more than hundred years ago in *Mind*, it is still one of the most dominant articles in the field of the Philosophy of Language. Almost at the same time, the discussion of pragmatics was also becoming popular. These two aspects of language have resolved many of the serious disputes in the relevant field. However, there are some other theories that contain a connection between these

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two aspects of language. Scott Soames' proposed *Alternative Picture* concerning the meaning and assertion is one of them. My current paper focuses on the problem arising from Russell's view of a sentence containing an incomplete definite description; and my purpose here is to provide a solution to this problem by using the Soamesian apparatus of meaning and assertion. Hence, after discussing the theory of definite descriptions, and detecting the problem arising from the incompleteness of definite descriptions, I will discuss Soames' theory of the meaning and assertion. Finally, I will propose a solution to the problem by using Soamesian apparatus.

Russell's theory of Definite Descriptions and the problem of Incomplete Definite Descriptions:
Definite descriptions are those denoting phrases which begin with the definite article "the". Although it is not mandatory for definite descriptions to begin with "the", it may begin with a possessive noun also, such as "my only son", "his sister", and so on. However, they can all be rephrased in the same way. For example, "my only son" can be rephrased as "the only son of mine". Now, consider the following example:

(1) The F is G.

Here, (1) is a descriptive sentence, where "the F" is a definite description and "is G" is a predicate phrase. Both Frege and Russell attempt to give a meaning of sentences containing definite descriptions. One of the pivotal differences between their views concerning the interpretation of a definite description is: for Frege, all singular terms, such as proper names, definite descriptions, demonstrative pronouns, and so on are the same. It means, like the names a definite description also expresses a sense and designates a referent. Frege claims that definite descriptions are referring expressions. Hence, a sentence of the form (1) is true if "the F" refers to a particular object o, and o is G. Though definite descriptions take place in sentences in the same places proper names do, Russell claims that they are far more different expressions than the singular terms. For him, definite descriptions are quantifying phrases which do not have any actual referents in the world. Russell treats them as though they indicate qualities. Now, whoever or

whatever (if there is any) fit the qualities mentioned in the definite descriptions can be the referents of the definite descriptions in question. It means that a definite description does not necessarily refer to a particular object. This indicates that a sentence containing a definite description always expresses a general proposition.

Although a definite description, such as "the *F*", does not denote any particular object, and even if nothing satisfies "the *F*", a person may easily understand its denotation and the meaning of the sentence. Moreover, for Russell, every descriptive sentence must have a truth-value, whereas Frege claims that sentences containing those descriptions which have no referents lack truth values. Russell further thinks that the definite description "the *F*" may denote a unique object *o*, but "o" that stands for *o* cannot be a part of the truth-condition of the proposition expressed by that sentence.

Russell's another important claim about definite descriptions is: definite descriptions are expressions involving uniqueness.[1] It means one and only one thing (if any) can satisfy a definite description, because "the" indicates the uniqueness of some entity. Moreover, sentences containing definite descriptions have a more complex logical construction than their grammatical construction. It means, sentences such as (1), express propositions whose logical structures are not as simple as their grammatical structures; rather they have a sharp quantificational structure. For example, a sentence of the form (1) is grammatically a simple subject-predicate sentence, but logically, it is a conjunction of three quantified statements. Hence, (1) can be paraphrased in the following way:

    (a)   At least one thing is an *F*
    (b)   At most one thing is an *F*
    (c)   Whatever is an *F* is *G*

Here, (a) is an existentially quantified statement, whereas (b) ensures the uniqueness condition and (c) attributes the predicate to the description. (a) to (c) can be written in the following way: *Exactly one thing is an F, and whatever is an F is G.* This is the semantic content of (1) which can be symbolized in the following way:

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1.   Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting", *Mind*, Vol. 14, No. 56 (1905), p. 481.

    (d) $(\exists x)[\{Fx \wedge (y)(Fy \supset y=x)\} \wedge Gx]$

According to the rule of conjunction, (d) is true if all of its conjuncts are true. Hence, (1) can be true if (a) to (c) are true. When we analyze a sentence containing a definite description in this way, the descriptive phrase always disappears. Hence, every sentence of the form (1) means: *a unique x – whoever or whatever satisfies "F"- has the property of being G*. If a definite description satisfies this uniqueness condition together with the condition stated in the predicate, then the non-compound sentence containing that definite description is true, otherwise false. If more than one object satisfies the definite description or nothing satisfies it at all, then that sentence of which that definite description is a constituent part is false. Definite descriptions which are satisfied by more than one objects, or which simply fail to fulfill the uniqueness condition are called incomplete definite descriptions. Consider this definite description: "the murderer of Victor". If this definite description is satisfied by more than one person (it means, if more than one person murdered Victor), then it is an incomplete definite description. A sentence containing such an incomplete definite description is simply false. For example:

    (2) The table is covered with books

According to the Russellian interpretation, the sentence (2) expresses the following proposition: *Exactly one thing is a table and whatever is a table is covered with books.* Now, if there is one and only one table, and that table is really covered with books, then (2) is true. However, if there is more than one table, then (2) must be false. As there is more than one table in the world, "the table" is an incomplete definite description, and thus, (2) is false.

    Though this analysis of a definite description seems correct, many philosophers find it problematic. P. F. Strawson is among those who are critical about Russell's theory. He, in his article "On Referring", argues that the uniqueness condition is not applicable to definite descriptions. It is true that we use "the" to indicate one particular object just like the grammatical use of the definite article. He calls it *uniquely referring use* of definite descriptions[2]. Although

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2.   P. F. Strawson, "On Referring", *Mind,* Vol. 59, No. 235 (1950), p. 320.

the uniqueness condition, according to Strawson, is applicable to definite descriptions when it is used strictly, it is not always applicable to definite descriptions in our everyday conversations. He says:

> …Russell says that a phrase of the form "the so-and-so", used strictly, "will only have an application in the event of there being one so-and-so and no more". Now it is obviously quite false that the phrase "the table" in the sentence "the table is covered with books", used normally, will "only have an application in the event of there being one table and no more.[3]

Strawson claims that if we follow the Russellian analysis, then many of the propositions of our uttered sentences containing incomplete definite descriptions will be false, whereas, we can assert something true of our intended objects by using those sentences. For example, according to the Russellian analysis, the literal meaning of (2) is: *exactly one thing is a table, and whatever is a table is covered with books*. However, as there is more than one table in the world, the proposition expressed by (2) is false. Interestingly, ordinary people can use the sentence (2) to assert something true about the intended table. A speaker can say something true by using (2), because when she utters (2) in a context, she simply has the intention to talk about a particular table. This is how ordinary speakers use such sentences in their everyday conversation. Now, if the particular table on the given context is covered with books, then the speaker has *said something true of the table* by uttering (2) in that context, whereas, according to the Russellian analysis, *the semantic content of (2) is false*. Hence, Strawson thinks that Russell's view of definite descriptions is incorrect as it fails to explain the phenomenon discussed above. Consider another example:

(3) The student got into an argument with a student from another school.

In the Russellian analysis, the proposition expressed by (3) is: *there is exactly one student, and whoever is a student got into an argument with a student from another school.* Here, the proposition expressed by (3) is not only false but also problematic. By uttering (3), at first, a speaker acknowledges the existence of one and only one student and, then he accepts the existence of another student which is inconsistent

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3.   Ibid, p. 332.

with the first acknowledgment. However, by using this false and inconsistent sentence, someone can easily assert something true of the student.

Now, the problem is: though the propositions expressed by the non-compound sentences containing incomplete definite descriptions are false, how can one sometimes use those sentences to assert something true? How can one succeed in asserting something true by uttering such sentences?

Soamesian Apparatus:
Though this problem of incomplete definite descriptions seems to be a serious threat to Russell's theory of definite descriptions, it does not pose any genuine threat to the theory. Russell's view concerning a sentence containing an incomplete definite description can be defended by using Scott Soames' theory concerning the relation between meaning and assertion.

Soames has rejected the traditionally believed relation between the semantic content of a sentence and the assertions made by the speaker by using it. Traditionally, it is believed that there is no difference between the meaning of a sentence and what the speaker wants to assert by using that sentence. Suppose, in a context C, a speaker utters a non-indexical sentence S, and the proposition expressed by the sentence S is M. According to the traditional belief, the semantic content M of the sentence S is identical with what is asserted by the speaker, e.g. N, by uttering the sentence S. It means:

> $M = N$; (where M is the proposition expressed by the sentence, and N is the assertion made by the speaker).

Traditionally, it is also believed that to understand the assertion N, it is necessary to understand the semantic content M of the sentence S. Therefore, the semantic content of a sentence determines the assertions made by a speaker, which means pragmatics comes next to semantics. For instance, suppose, a guest needs a glass of water, and he utters:

> (4) I need a glass of water.

The proposition expressed by this sentence is very clear: *I need a glass of water*. Here, by uttering this sentence, what the speaker

wants to assert is the semantic content of the sentence, which means these two are identical as said before. If the speaker fails to determine the semantic content of (4), she cannot assert it. It is also believed that the assertion made by a speaker by using a sentence is at least a part of the semantic content of that sentence.

Soames rejects this traditional view and tries to distinguish between what a sentence means and what one asserts by uttering that sentence. The traditional view is applicable to many cases, such as the case of (4), but there are many cases where the traditional view cannot be applied. Soames claims that by uttering the sentence S in a context C, what we assert, i.e. N, is not identical with the proposition M which is expressed by the sentence S; rather, they can be different. There is a gap between the meaning of the sentence and the assertion made by using that sentence; hence, they are not identical. Therefore:

$M \neq N$; (where M is the proposition expressed by the sentence, and N is the assertion made by the speaker).

For example, suppose, everyone in Jenny's family is ready to go to a party, except Jenny. After fifteen minutes someone asked, "Isn't she going with us?" Someone else replied:

(5) Jenny is ready.

Now, the semantic content of this sentence is:

(5a) Jenny is ready.

However, this is not what the speaker asserts by uttering the sentence. What the speaker wants to assert is that:

(5b) Now, Jenny is ready to go to the party with us.

It is very clear that (5b) is neither identical with (5a), nor a part of (5a); rather, it is richer than (5a). The reasons to believe this claim is: when a speaker utters a sentence, she utters it in a context and every context has its own elements. As a result, the semantic content of that sentence interacts with those elements supplied by the context, and thus, the proposition one gets is much richer than the semantic content of that sentence. Now, the question is: why does the semantic content of a sentence interact with the elements supplied by the context? The semantic content of a sentence is like a set of

conditions that constrains[4] the possible candidates for the assertion, and the speakers have the freedom to choose a candidate to be asserted from those possible candidates. The proposition semantically expressed by a sentence is often a complete proposition, where pragmatic enrichment is optional. However, if it fails to be a complete proposition, then pragmatic enrichment is needed.[5] This is because the semantic content of the sentence may lack constituents or information that must be supplied pragmatically to make a complete proposition. In short, it does not matter whether the semantic content of a sentence expresses a complete or incomplete proposition, it often interacts with elements supplied by the context, and thus one gets a new proposition. This new proposition is called pragmatically enriched proposition, which is the speaker's primary intention to assert.[6] Pragmatically enriched proposition is the primary assertion made by the speaker. As every sentence is uttered in a context, there is always a chance of proper enrichments. Hence, in a context, the assertion made by the speaker by using a sentence and its meaning is not necessarily identical. The other propositions one gets along with the primary assertion, as Soames mentions, are also counted as asserted if and only if they are obvious, relevant, unmistakable, necessary, and apriori consequences of the primary assertion, together with salient shared presuppositions of the conversational background.[7] However, the semantic content which may be a complete proposition may not be asserted, if it is not an obvious, unmistakable, relevant and apriori consequence of the primary assertion.

So, we see, the proposition semantically expressed by a sentence does not always determine the assertion made by the speaker; rather,

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4. Scott Soames, "Drawing the Line Between Meaning and Implicature – and Relating both to Assertion", *Philosophical Essays: Natural Language: what it means and how we use it,* Vol. 1, (Princeton & Oxford University Press, 2009b), p. 317.

5. Ibid., p. 317.

6. Scott Soames, "The Gap Between Meaning and Assertion: Why What We Literally Say Often Differs from What Our Words Literally Mean", *Philosophical Essays: Natural Language: what it means and how we use it,* Vol. 1, p. 281.

7. Soames (2009a), p. 281.

it constrains the relevant enrichments for making the primary assertion.[8] It means that the semantic content of a sentence has an important role in forming the primary assertion. It has a contribution to the speaker's primary intention to assert something. This is because it is the semantic content of the sentence that gets enriched by interacting with the pragmatic supplementation. Thus, the assertion made by a speaker by using a sentence is the pragmatic enrichment of the semantic content of the sentence.[9] As the semantically expressed proposition does not directly determine the assertion. Hence, it is clear that by uttering a sentence a competent speaker of a language can assert something without knowing the semantic content of the sentence. A competent speaker not only can use a sentence in a context to assert her intention, but also she can understand and judge what others are trying to assert without having a reliable and clear grasp of the proposition semantically expressed by the sentence. For example, consider the sentence containing a bare numerical quantifier:

(6) I have n Fs.

By uttering (6) in different contexts, we can assert different propositions. The semantic content of the sentence (6) is not determined or a complete proposition. The sentence (6) can be used to assert "I have at least n Fs", "I have at most n Fs", "I have exactly n Fs", or "I have up to n Fs" depending on its context.[10] Sentences like (6) require pragmatic enrichment to assert a complete proposition. A competent speaker may not identify the semantic content of (6), but she can use this sentence to assert something, and she knows what she is asserting as well as what others are trying to assert by uttering (6). Now, it is quite evident that, in a particular context, by uttering a sentence, what a speaker asserts may not be the semantic content of that sentence. By adding contextual elements to the semantic content of the sentence, one gets the pragmatically enriched proposition which is the speaker's primary assertion. Thus, the meaning of a sentence and the assertions made by the speaker by using that

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8.   Ibid., p. 280.
9.   Ibid., p. 288.
10.   Soames (2009b), p. 322.

sentence may not be identical. This is the heart of Soames' alternative theory of meaning that indicates the gap between the meaning of a sentence and the assertion made by the speaker by using that sentence. This theory may be called Soames' Alternative Picture. On the basis of what is learned from Soames' Alternative Picture, in the next section, I will propose a solution to the problem arising from incomplete definite descriptions. In my proposed solution, I will use Soamesian apparatus, namely his distinction between meaning and assertion.

A proposed Solution to the Problem of Incomplete Definite Descriptions by using the Soamesian Apparatus:

Recall the problem posed by a sentence containing an incomplete definite description. The problem is: if a non-compound sentence containing an incomplete definite description always expresses a false proposition (according to the Russellian analysis), then how can one sometimes assert something true by uttering that sentence? This phenomenon seems to be a threat to Russell's theory of definite descriptions as Russell's theory apparently fails to account for it.

However, from Soames' Alternative Picture concerning the meaning and assertion, we have learnt that the semantic content of a sentence may not be identical with the assertion made by a speaker by using that sentence. A sentence containing an incomplete definite description is actually context sensitive just like the sentences containing bare numerical quantifiers. The linguistic expression expressed by such a sentence fails to be a complete proposition. Therefore, it needs contextual enrichment in order to generate a complete truth-evaluable proposition. This contextually enriched complete proposition is the primary assertion of the speaker. When a primary assertion is formed, the completion may count as one of the other assertions if it is a relevant, obvious, apriori consequence of the primary assertion. However, the semantic content of a sentence containing an incomplete definite description is not counted as asserted by a competent speaker, because in such a case the speaker does not intend to assert a sentence which expresses a false semantic content. For example, consider the following sentence:

(7) The table is covered with books.

In the Russellian analysis, the semantic content of (7) is: *exactly one thing is a table, and whatever is a table is covered with books.* It means:

> (7a) (the x: x is a table) x is covered with books.

Suppose, the table I am talking about is mine. Now by uttering (7) the pragmatically enriched proposition that I intend to assert is:

> (7b) (the x: x is a table which belongs to me) x is covered with books.

Here, pragmatic information available in the context is added to (7a), because (7a) does not express a complete, truth-evaluable proposition. It lacks information or constituents to express a complete, truth-evaluable proposition. Hence, in this case, pragmatic enrichment is mandatory. Due to the pragmatic enrichment of (7a), one gets pragmatically enriched proposition (7b) which is the speaker's primary intention to assert. However, (7a) is not counted as asserted, because there is more than one table in the world; there is no object that uniquely fits the definite description "the table"; and thus, (7a) is clearly false. Moreover, following the Gricean maxim of quality, it may be said that a speaker cannot assert this kind of plain false propositions. Quite evidently, (7a) is not a necessary or an obvious, apriori consequence of the asserted and enriched proposition (7b). This is why (7a) is not counted as asserted. However, (7c) and (7d) are counted as asserted:

> (7c) the table is my property.
> (7d) my table is covered with books.

Now, if my table is really covered with books, then I have succeeded in saying something true by uttering (7) which expresses a false proposition. That means that, as the semantic content of a sentence is different from the assertion made by using the sentence, a speaker can easily assert something different from its semantic content. Now, reconsider the example (3):

> (3) The student got into an argument with a student from another school.

The proposition semantically expressed by (3) is:

> (3a) (the x: x is a student) x got into an argument with a student from another school.

I have already discussed the reasons for why (3a) is not only false but also inconsistent. Despite the inconsistency and falsehood of (3a), one can assert something true by uttering (3) in a particular context. Now, the primary assertion made by uttering (3) is:

> (3b) (the *x*: *x* is a student of a school) *x* got into an argument with a student from another school.

It is notable that (3) suggests the existence of at least two students of two different schools. Here, due to the presence of more than one student in the world, the false semantic content (3a) is not asserted by the speaker. Hence, it is not an obvious, necessary and apriori consequence of (3b), but (3c) is counted as asserted.

> (3c) two students from two schools got into an argument.

Now, if this incident really happens, then it is clear that one can say something true of the student by uttering (3). Though (3a) expresses a false and problematic proposition, it cannot hinder one to assert something true of her intended referent. Moreover, the primary assertion (3b) is not inconsistent anymore. Now, it is clear that the falsehood of the semantic content does not pose any problem for the speaker to assert a sentence which expresses a true proposition. It happens so, due to the fact that the semantic content of a sentence is not identical with the assertion made by it, and the semantic content does not determine the assertion.[11] Therefore, by uttering a sentence containing an incomplete definite description which expresses a false proposition, a speaker can sometimes assert something true of her intended referent. This is how Russell's claim concerning the incomplete definite description can be properly defended by using the Soamesian apparatus namely, the Alternative Picture.

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11. Suppose, in a context the speaker's primary intention to assert is not available to the hearer. Now, how can the hearer identify the primary assertion among the several assertions? The solution is quite simple. If a hearer gets confused among the several assertions, and she cannot identify the primary assertion, then no matter what the reason is she can use the Gricean maxims to identify the primary assertion. Gricean maxims play a vital role in determining the assertion made by a speaker by limiting the number of possible candidates for the assertion. The most informative, most evident, strongest, and the most relevant proposition is considered as the primary assertion, following the maxims of quantity, quality and relevance.

Here, one fact is notable that the semantic content of a sentence is common to what literal uses of the sentence express in all normal contexts;[12] whereas, an assertion made by a speaker by using a sentence is what the speaker intends to assert in a context, or what the speaker wants her hearer to understand by uttering that sentence. The former one is what a sentence means which is a discussion of semantics and the latter one is what a speaker means by uttering a sentence which is a matter of pragmatics. Russell's theory of definite description is a semantic theory of the English language. However, the objection raised by Strawson is related to the speaker's intention of asserting something on a particular occasion which is a concern of pragmatics. This problem raised due to the confusion, or ignorance of the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. The traditional view which is not correct also arises from this confusion. Russell's theory is not about the speaker's intention. Russell in his article "Mr. Strawson on Referring" clearly states his position:

> My theory of descriptions was never intended as an analysis of the state of mind of those who utter sentences containing descriptions….I was concerned to find a more accurate and analysed thought to replace the somewhat confused thoughts which most people at most times have in their heads.[13]

Hence, as a theory of meaning which is an issue of semantics, Russell's theory of definite descriptions does not need to answer the problem arising from incompleteness of definite descriptions as that issue is related to pragmatics. This is why Strawson's objection fails to weaken Russell's theory of definite descriptions.

Conclusion:
In a nutshell, it can be said that the objection does not pose any serious threat to the accuracy of Russell's theory of definite descriptions. The reasons are following: (a) his theory of definite descriptions is a semantic theory, whereas, the objection raised by Strawson is related to pragmatics, (b) the root of this objection is the confusion between the semantic content of a sentence and the

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12.   Soames (2009b), p. 324.
13.   Bertrand Russell, "Mr. Strawson on Referring", *Mind,* Vol. 66, No. 263 (1957), p. 388.

assertion made by a speaker by using that sentence. It means that the traditional view concerning the meaning and assertion is the main reason for which this objection arises. If we accept Soames' Alternative Picture concerning the meaning and assertion instead of the traditional view, then we can see that the problem arising from incomplete definite descriptions just disappears. Moreover, if we apply the Soamesian apparatus of the meaning and assertion on other aspects of Russell's theory of definite descriptions, then we will not only get a proper way to analyze a sentence containing a definite description but also we could answer many other objections raised against Russell's theory of definite descriptions.

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