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Reviewer's address

Dr. Jonathan Cole
Clinical Neurophysiology, Poole Hospital
Longfleet Road
Poole, BH15 2JB
United Kingdom

Email: jonathan.cole@poole.nhs.uk

About the reviewer

Jonathan Cole trained in medicine in Oxford and at The Middlesex Hospital. After two periods of neurphysiological research in the University Laboratory of Physiology, Oxford, he moved to Southampton. He is now Senior Lecturer at the University of Southampton and Consultant in Clinical Neurophysiology at Poole Hospital. His research interests have focussed on movement after sensory loss and he has published many papers. He has also been interested in the phenomenology of neurological illness and has written three biographical books (on sensory loss, facial problems and spinal cord injury): *Pride and a Daily Marathon* (1995), *About Face* (1998) and *Still Lives: Narratives of Spinal Cord Injury* (2003).

Marga Reimer and Anne Bezuidenhout (eds), *Descriptions and Beyond.* Oxford: Clarendon, 2004, 668 pages. ISBN 10: 0-19-927051-1

Reviewed by John-Michael Kuczynski (University of California, Santa Barbara)

Descriptions and Beyond is a collection of articles concerning Russell's "theory of descriptions". Before we can evaluate that collection, Russell's theory must be put into some context.

If our pre-theoretical intuitions are correct, occurrences of "the current U.S. President" (in 2005) refer to George W. Bush. In general, definite descriptions seem to be singular terms, like proper nouns and demonstratives. But Russell argued that they are quantifiers. *The phi* is to be defined thus: *…the phi…* means: *exactly one thing x has phi, and…x…*So

(#) "the current U.S. president smokes"

means:

(##) *Exactly one thing x is a current U.S. President, and x smokes.*

Thus (#) is synonymous with:

(###) "Exactly one thing x is a current U.S. President, and x smokes".

The same point is meant to hold (mutatis mutandis) for any definite description.[1]

Let us now discuss the primary motivation for this theory.[2] Consider the expression "George W. Bush". The cognitive value of

(*) "George W. Bush smokes"

is obviously different from that of (#). (By the "cognitive value" of a sentence, I mean what is communicated by utterances of it.) And of

(^) "the current occupant of the most important governmental post in the country with the world's largest economy smokes"

has a different cognitive value from each of the other two sentences just mentioned.

Why does (#) differ in cognitive value from each of (*) and (^)? The reason is clear. The concept *current U.S. president* is a constituent of what is communicated by sentences of the form "…the *current U.S. president*…". For example, if I utter (#), part of what is transmitted to you concerns that concept. But that concept is *not* part of what is communicated by (^) or by (*). That is why a perfectly logical speaker of English could assent to (#) without assenting to either of (^) or (*).

Given this, it seems reasonable to suppose that the proposition *literally meant* by sentences of the form "…the current U.S. president…" have the concept *current U.S. president* as a constituent. Supposing this is the case, what do such sentences say about that concept? For example, what does

(#) "the U.S. President smokes"

say about that concept? The word "the" obviously indicates existence (unlike the word "no") and also uniqueness (unlike the word "a"). So if (#) is to be true, there must be at least one U.S. president, and there must also be at most one. Further, if that one thing should not smoke, then (#) will be false. But if that one thing *does* smoke, then (#) will be true. So (#) is true exactly if:

(##) *Exactly one thing x is a current U.S. President, and x smokes.*

So it seems that (##) must be the proposition meant by (#).Given any other definite description, an exactly similar argument seems to establish that it is a quantifier, not a singular term.[3] To sum up: in order to accommodate the obvious fact that the proposition communicated by a sentence of the form *…the phi…*[4] has the concept *phi* as a constituent, we must suppose that *the phi* is a quantifier of the kind just described. So the primary motivation for Russell's theory lies in facts about what is communicated by sentences containing definite descriptions.

There are some fairly obvious problems with Russell's theory and also with Russell's argument for it. For the sake of argument, suppose that "the current U.S. president" is what it appears to be: a singular term that, at this time in history, refers to George W. Bush. The semantic rule for "the current U.S. president" is *not* going to be:

(*) "the current U.S. president" refers to Bush.

Rather, it is going to be:

(**) *If* there is a unique U.S. President x, *then* "the current U.S. president" refers to x.[5]

So the semantic rule for:

(#) "the current U.S. president smokes"

is *not* going to be:

(i) "the current U.S. president smokes" means: *Bush smokes.*

It is going to be:

(ii) *If* there is a unique U.S. President x, *then* "the current U.S. president smokes" means: *x smokes.*

A comparison might be appropriate. If Fred says "I am tired", he is attributing fatigue to himself; his token of "I" refers to Fred. But the semantic rule responsible for that assignment is obviously not: tokens of "I" refer to Fred. Rather, it is: *if* somebody x tokens the word "I", *then* that token refers to x. Similarly, even if (in 2005) a token of "the current U.S. President" is a singular term that refers to Bush, the semantic rule responsible for that assignment is *not*: "the current U.S. President" refers to Bush. It is: *if* there is a unique U.S. President x, *then* "the current U.S. President" refers to x.

In general, whenever one hears a sentence, one computes its meaning on the basis of the semantic rules that give it meaning. So when one hears a token

of (#), one computes its meaning on the basis of the semantic rules that give it meaning, one of these being (ii). Anyone who grasps (ii) will know that, if (#) is true, then there is exactly one U.S. president x, and x smokes. So to anyone capable of understanding it, an utterance of (#) will *convey* the existence claim: *there is exactly one current U.S. president x, and x smokes.*

Notice that (#) does not have that existence claim for its literal meaning: but it still *conveys it.* Notice also that it doesn't convey it by way of the normal, Gricean, post-semantic implicatures. It conveys it by way of what we might call *pre*-semantic implicature: that existence claim is conveyed to somebody *in the process* of that person's computing the relevant semantic content. In this reviewer's opinion, the phenomenon of pre-semantic implicature has been grossly undervalued in contemporary semantics. Many theories — those of Russell and Frege among them — constitute displacements of pre-semantic implicature onto semantics proper. In any case, given only that (#) communicates a certain kind of existence claim, it doesn't follow that "the U.S. president" is a quantifier. This point applies to all definite descriptions. The just mentioned facts about what is communicated by sentences containing such expressions to no degree favor the view that such expressions are anything other than singular terms. This point — or one quite close to it — was made long ago by John Searle (1970: 160–161; see also Searle 1958). In fact, it is made (if obliquely) in Strawson's landmark (1950) paper. It is nowhere even mentioned in *Descriptions and Beyond.*

Noises and ink-marks don't interpret themselves. Speakers must interpret them. They do so, in part, by applying their knowledge of semantic rules. The process of computing literal meaning — as distinguished from literal meaning itself — is a rich source of information. Much of what an utterance tells one is *pre*-semantic. When we take pre-semantic implicature into account, it minimizes the burden that must be placed on semantics itself. In light of what was said a moment ago, there is no need to deny that "the current U.S. president" refers to Bush. When we attend to pre-semantics, it turns out that we can hold onto the presumption that "the current U.S. president" refers to Bush, while accommodating the data about cognitive significance (about what is communicated) that motivate Russell's theory.

Let us consider the second main problem with Russell's view: it embodies a failure to distinguish semantic from conceptual analysis. A conceptual analysis of a sentence does not give the linguistic meaning of a sentence; rather, it gives the *meaning of that meaning*, so to speak; it produces a proposition that is *logically* equivalent with that meant by the sentence, but is more transparent in respect of its inferential structure. Consider the sentence: "x is a circle". The linguistic

meaning is simply: *x is a circle.* But to give the proposition literally meant by that sentence is not to give a conceptual analysis of that sentence. A conceptual analysis is given by a proposition like: x *is a closed planar figure of uniform curvature.* The latter proposition more perspicuously displays its inferential structure than does *x is a circle*. But the two propositions are logically equivalent.

Russell is clearly doing *either* semantic *or* conceptual analysis. Given this, it is clear that his theory is really a piece of *semantic* analysis. For the sake of argument, suppose Russell is not doing semantic analysis. In that case, he is doing conceptual analysis. His theory then amounts to this: the proposition literally meant by (#) is *logically equivalent* with *exactly one thing x is a current U.S. President, and x smokes.* But any proposition logically equivalent thereto will itself be a quantified generalization of some kind. So *if* Russell is doing conceptual analysis, then the proposition literally meant by (#) must itself be a quantified generalization. In that case, definite descriptions must, at the level of literal meaning, be quantifiers. On the other hand, if Russell is not doing conceptual analysis, then he is doing semantic analysis; and he is straightforwardly saying that, in terms of their literal meanings, definite descriptions are quantifiers. Either way, his theory entails that, at the level of literal meaning, definite descriptions are quantifiers. So in the end, his theory concerns the literal meanings of definite descriptions — it is a piece of *semantic*, as opposed to conceptual, analysis (see Kuczynski 2004a).

Given this, there is an obvious problem with Russell's theory. Since Russell is giving a semantic analysis of (#), it follows trivially that he is giving its semantics, and is therefore saying what is *literally meant* by it. So he is saying that (#) has the same *linguistic meaning* as:

(###) "exactly one thing x is a current U.S. President, and x smokes".

So, if that theory is right, then (#) and (###) are synonymous. "Synonymous" means "having the same meaning" or "semantically the same". So if, as Russell's theory requires, (#) and (###) are synonymous, they *ipso facto* do not differ in any semantically significant respects: the differences between them must be as innocuous as those between a Southerner's pronunciation of a sentence and Northerner's. But the differences between (#) and (###) are not innocuous. If somebody asked you whether there was exactly one U.S. president, you would display a lack of linguistic competence by uttering (###) as a reply; but you would display no such lack of competence were you to utter (#). Russellians invoke principles of pragmatics to explain the fact that pairs like (#) and (###) are seldom, if ever, interchangeable (see Blackburn 1984: 308–310). But if, as Russell's theory requires, they were *synonymous*, then it wouldn't be necessary

to invoke such principles in the first place. Synonymous sentences are *ipso facto* interchangeable.[6] So (#) and (###) are *not* synonymous, and Russell's theory would seem to be wrong.

The question whether Russell was doing semantic as opposed to conceptual analysis is not even raised in *Descriptions and Beyond*, even though, as we just saw, if Russell's theory is a piece of semantic analysis, it is committed to some very strong, and doubtful, claims about synonymy.

Virtually every article in *Descriptions and Beyond* defends Russell's theory. They all defend it on the grounds that the alternative theory — the view that definite descriptions are singular terms — cannot accommodate facts about the cognitive significances of sentences containing such expressions. But as we saw above, and as the present author argues in many places, that is simply not true: such a position simply ignores the enormity of information conveyed to a person *in the process of computing literal meaning*; it ignores the power of pre-semantic implicature. Though all written by fine and estimable scholars, the articles in the anthology under review defend Russell's theory against arcane and minor objections, and do not even address the obvious and non-trivial objections to it, such as those stated in the present review, and those stated long ago by John Searle and, in fact, by Peter Strawson. (Michael Devitt's fine article, "A Case for Referring Descriptions" is an exception to these points. Another exception is R.M. Sainsbury's penetrating paper "Referring Descriptions".)

The contents of *Descriptions and Beyond* ignore another important semantic datum. David Kaplan (1989) argued persuasively that tokens of indexicals are "directly referential".[7] So if Fred says "I am tired", his words encode the proposition *Fred is tired.* And if, while pointing to an image of himself on a T.V. screen, Fred says "I am that man", what is *literally* encoded in his words is: *Fred is identical with Fred.* If Kaplan's widely accepted analysis is correct, then there is a massive deviation between, on the one hand, what is literally meant by sentences containing indexicals and, on the other hand, the propositions that they literally mean. These divergences are not generally taken to be grounds for rejecting Kaplan's theory. So it is curious that exactly similar divergences are taken to be grounds for rejecting the view that definite descriptions are singular terms. In fact, this is doubly perplexing given the fact that definite descriptions are regarded by some semanticists as complex demonstratives. Over fifty years ago, Strawson himself likened definite descriptions to indexicals. It is worth pointing out that, etymologically, "the" is a truncated form of "that". This whole avenue of inquiry is simply ignored in *Descriptions and Beyond.*

Further, exactly similar divergences between literal and communicated meaning occur where proper names are concerned. Given what Kripke (1972)

says, we have good reason to believe that "Hesperus" and "Phosphorus" are directly referential, so that, for some object O, "Hesperus is Phosphorus" has for its literal meaning the trivial proposition *O=O.* But that sentence obviously communicates a non-trivial proposition. So consideration of proper names[8] and indexicals provides us with abundant evidence that, where singular terms are concerned, there can be massive deviations between literal and communicated meaning. (Above, we saw how to explain these deviations in the case of definite descriptions. Indexicals submit to a similar treatment. The case of proper names is more involved.[9]) It is curious that these facts about proper names and indexicals, which we *know* to be singular terms, are not even mentioned in *Descriptions and Beyond* or, for that matter, anywhere else in the pro-Russell literature (see, for example, Neale 1990). And yet they were discussed (though somewhat obliquely) by Strawson in his article of over fifty years ago, and also by Searle almost forty years ago.

In his celebrated (1905) paper, Russell gives four arguments purporting to show that definite descriptions are quantifiers. Exact analogues of those arguments "show" — what we now know to be false — that proper names and tokens of indexicals are quantifiers. Those very arguments (mutatis mutandis) can be made to "demonstrate" that "Hesperus" is a quantifier.[10] We know it is not; so those arguments must involve a non-sequitur. For reasons of brevity, we cannot pursue this issue here. But it is noteworthy that none of the articles in *Descriptions and Beyond* and, so far as the present reviewer knows, none of the literature regarding definite descriptions acknowledges that fact.

One last note: Russell's theory is decidedly implausible when it comes to definite descriptions occurring in questions and imperatives. Searle (1970: 161–162) made this point long ago. If Russell's theory is correct, then when you say "is the maid coming?", your utterance is synonymous with: "is it the case that we have exactly one maid x, and that x is coming?". But this seems wrong, and it conflicts with the presumption that synonymous expressions should be interchangeable. Elsewhere (Kuczynski 2004b), the present author has argued that consideration of non-indicative sentences clearly warrants the rejection of Russell's theory. Whether or not this is the case, any anthology concerning that theory should deal with this issue. Regrettably, *Descriptions and Beyond* ignores it. With the exceptions of the papers by Devitt and Sainsbury, it instead focuses on technical minutiae that are peripheral to the rich semantic and epistemological issues brought together by Russell's important, but flawed, theory.

Notes

1. See Russell (1905) and the introduction to Whitehead and Russell (1912).

2. Russell gave several arguments for this theory. But the following gives the conceit underlying most of the various arguments that have been given for it over the years (including most of those given by Russell); and it is also the most compelling reason to adopt that theory.

3. I am prescinding from the fact that many definite descriptions — so-called "improper" ones, like "the dog", "the man over there" — are probably subject to context-based restrictions.

4. The asterices are meant to be quasi-quotes.

5. Strictly speaking, the right rule would probably involve context-based restrictions. Also, for reasons that I haven't space to discuss here, the right rule would make a distinction between types and tokens. So the right rule would be something like this: If, in context C, there is exactly one salient U.S. president x, then tokens of the sentence-type "the U.S. president smokes" that occur in C encode the proposition: *x smokes.* In *Literal Meaning and Cognitive Content* (unpublished), I discuss the need for a complete "tokenization" of many semantic rules.

6. See Mates (1952). Grice and Frege would deny this. In their view "Bob is tall and he was malnourished as a child" is literally synonymous with "Bob is tall but he was malnourished as a child". Intuition recoils at this view. In *Literal Meaning and Cognitive Content*, I argue that differences in what Frege called "tone" or "coloring" — or, as Grice put, in "conventional implicature" — are actually *semantic* differences. They do not reflect differences in *truth*-conditions, but (as I put it) in truth-*preconditions.* So they reflect the operativeness of different background assumptions.

7. Kaplan's (1989) work is anticipated by Strawson (1950).

8. See Kuczynski 2004a, especially the section entitled "Conceptual versus Semantic Analysis".

9. I deal with these problems at length in *Literal Meaning and Cognitive Content* and *Intensionality* (both unpublished).

10. I must leave it to the reader to verify that, in fact, analogues of Russell's four puzzles show that "Hesperus" and tokens of demonstratives are quantifiers.

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Reviewer's address

John-Michael Kuczynski
2665 South Bayshore Drive, Suite 1101
Coconut Grove Florida
33133 Florida
U.S.A.

Email: jsbach@jps.net

About the reviewer

John-Michael Kuczynski is a PhD candidate in philosophy at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has published a book advocating an anti-realist view of sense-perception (*Elements of Virtualism*, 2003), and has several articles forthcoming, or already published, in the *Journal for Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, Cognition and Communication, Kriterion*, *Teorema*, and other journals.