

AS

WILEY

Contextual Dependence and Definite Descriptions

Author(s): François Recanati

Source: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol. 87 (1986 - 1987), pp. 57-73

Published by: [Wiley](#) on behalf of [Aristotelian Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4545055>

Accessed: 20-01-2016 12:20 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Aristotelian Society and *Wiley* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

IV*—CONTEXTUAL DEPENDENCE AND DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS

by François Recanati

I

As is well-known, the reference of singular terms in natural languages often depends on the context of utterance. A token of 'I', for example, refers to the person who utters that token, a token of 'now' refers to a period of time which includes the moment when this token is uttered, and so on. In the fifties, some philosophers thought that reference was always a pragmatic, contextual matter; and this view is again current among contemporary linguists and philosophers working on the pragmatics of natural languages. Does this mean that all referring expressions are 'indexical', like 'now' or 'I'? Obviously they are not. A definite description like 'the president of the United States of America in 1986' is surely not indexical in the ordinary sense. But then, how are we to understand the claim that reference is always context-dependent? Can we make that claim consistent with due recognition of the fact that not all singular terms are indexical? This is the question I will try to answer in this paper. I hasten to add that I will not be concerned with *trivial* forms of context-dependence, such as the dependence of reference on the language being spoken. There might exist a language, say Lambdese, where the words 'the president of the USA in 1986' mean the same as the English description 'the inventor of the zip'; supposing Julius to be the inventor of the zip, the description 'the president of the USA in 1986', uttered in a context where Lambdese and not English is spoken, would refer to Julius and not to Ronald Reagan. This form of context-dependence is trivial and will be set aside in this paper; I will always consider the language spoken as fixed. Context-dependence will be deemed non-trivial and worthy of consideration only to the extent that a given expression, with a fixed meaning, makes in different contexts different contributions to

* Meeting of the Aristotelian Society held at 5/7 Tavistock Place, London WC1, on Monday, 24 November, 1986 at 6.00 p.m.

what is said (to the proposition expressed) by means of the sentence including this expression.

We refer to particulars by means of indexicals, proper names, and definite descriptions. Definite descriptions can be complete ('the president of the USA in 1986') or incomplete ('the president'). The reference of indexicals and incomplete definite descriptions is known to be context-dependent, so the only thing that remains to be done by way of demonstrating the universality of context-dependence is to show that both proper names and complete definite descriptions are referentially context-dependent.

As far as proper names are concerned, the task is not too difficult. The reference of proper names is notoriously context-dependent. The name 'Aristotle' sometimes refers to the philosopher, sometimes to Onassis and sometimes to one of my cats. To be sure, it can be argued that in each case a different name is involved—that there are three homonymous names 'Aristotle'; what the context does, on that view, is to determine *which* name is being used. If this were true, then the context-dependence of proper names would be of the trivial sort mentioned above; it would be a form of language-dependence. But this would imply that proper names are individuated (in part) by their bearers, and this in turn implies that it is a linguistic contention which links the proper name 'Aristotle' to a given individual (*e.g.* the philosopher). Now, this claim seems to me indefensible.¹ The only *linguistic* convention involved in the case of proper names is the (general) convention that a proper name refers to its bearer; *which* object happens to be the bearer of the name is an extra-linguistic fact, a fact which does not have to be known for the language to be mastered (if by 'language' we mean, as I do, something like English or French). Thus the reference of a given name is really a matter of context. This is true of all proper names, including those which have a single bearer and give rise to no ambiguity.

The only serious problem for someone who claims that reference is always context-dependent is raised by complete definite descriptions, such as 'the president of the United States of America in 1986'. Does their reference somehow depend on

¹ For sound criticism of that claim, see Cohen (1980).

the context of utterance? Well, there is an argument purporting to show that it is the case. It goes like this:

‘The president of the US in 1986’ denotes Reagan *in the actual world*, but the world might have been different; Carter might have been reelected. So the reference of a complete definite description depends on how the world is; and how the world is is typically a contextual, non-linguistic matter. It is by virtue of a fact, not of a linguistic convention, that the description denotes Reagan rather than Carter.

To this argument, however, one may raise two objections. First, the sort of context-dependence I have just mentioned—‘world-dependence’, as we might call it—is not universal, since rigid definite descriptions, such as ‘the cube root of 27’, denote the same thing in all possible worlds. World-dependence, then, is limited to non-rigid descriptions. Second, this sort of context-dependence, when it exists, is often trivial, for only in a certain type of case does the variation of reference across worlds imply that to a given sentence with a fixed meaning there correspond different propositions in different contexts. Some people think that when a description is used referentially its reference is part of the proposition expressed; if this is true, then, *when the description is used referentially*, the variation of reference does induce a corresponding variation in the proposition expressed. But everybody agrees that when a description is used attributively, the proposition expressed does not include the reference of the description but rather something like an individual concept. It follows that the proposition expressed by means of a sentence where an attributive description occurs is not affected by the variation of the reference of that description across worlds. The conclusion is that, even if we consider only non-rigid descriptions, this form of context-dependence cannot be both universal and non-trivial. As a non-trivial sort of context-dependence, affecting the proposition expressed, it is not universal: very often, the world will affect, through the reference of the description, the truth-value of the proposition expressed but not the proposition itself. ‘The president of the US in 1986 (whoever he is) is a former actor’ is true with respect to the actual world and false with respect to a counterfactual world in which

Carter has been reelected. Here the only sort of context-dependence there is is the trivial dependence of the truth-value on the world of evaluation.

The objections are sound, but, suitably modified, I think that the argument can be salvaged. In this paper, I will show that there is a form of context-dependence, *very close to world-dependence*, which affects all definite descriptions and which is non-trivial. The form of context-dependence I have in mind is the dependence of the reference of a description on the relevant 'domain of discourse'. I will first describe this peculiar form of context-dependence and show that it affects all definite descriptions; I will then argue that it is a non-trivial form of context-dependence.

II

Let me start by making a distinction between two sorts of contextual features on which the reference of a singular term may depend. A first set of features includes who is talking, when, where, to whom, etc. Indexicals refer to those 'external' features of the context of utterance. A second set of features includes what is being talked about (the topic of conversation), what has been said so far—in the sense not of which words were uttered, but which propositions were expressed—and so on. So we have the external context of speech on the one hand and its content on the other; but it is important to realize that the content of on-going speech is part of the context with respect to which any utterance has to be interpreted—as much part of the context as anything else.

To know the reference of 'now' or 'at the present time' one must identify the time of utterance, an external feature of context. Some people wrongly think that the same goes for 'elliptical' or 'incomplete' definite descriptions like 'the president'. For example, Husserl, in his interesting discussion of context-dependence, extends indexicality to such descriptions, saying: 'When a contemporary German speaks of "*the Emperor*", he means the present German Emperor' (Husserl 1913:85). In such cases, according to Husserl, there is an implicit reference to the external context of utterance, and what the description refers to depends on where and when it is uttered. But this is confusing. It is not primarily the external context of utterance that is

relevant for fixing the reference of an incomplete definite description, but the situation talked about. To know what 'the president' (or 'the Emperor') refers to, one must know the current topic of conversation. If the conversation is about the politics of present-day France, it is likely that 'the president' will refer to the present president of France, namely Mitterrand. If the conversation is indeed political but about the United States, Reagan will be referred to. It is not a matter of where and when the conversation takes place, for it is quite possible for someone in the United States to talk about the politics of present-day France, in which case it will be clear that by 'the president' he means Mitterrand and not Reagan.

The source of the confusion is obvious enough. Not infrequently we are talking about what is going on here and now, about the situation in which the conversation takes place. For example, I am talking with Fred in room B at time *t*, and we are talking about what happens in Room B at time *t*. In such a case, the reference of an incomplete definite description like 'the table' does depend on some external feature of the situation of utterance—which table is referred to depends on which table is in room B at time *t*—but this is so not because the external context of utterance as such is directly referred to, as happens when the referring expression is indexical, but because the situation talked about happens to be identical with the external context of utterance. Even in such cases, what matters primarily, for fixing the reference of incomplete definite descriptions, is the situation talked about (the 'thing-meant', in the terminology of Gardiner (1932)), not the external context of utterance.

The situation talked about can be viewed as a mini-world, a fragment of the world. Mini-worlds help us to solve the problem incomplete definite descriptions raise for Russell's theory of descriptions. The existence and uniqueness condition which, according to Russell's theory, is part of the meaning of an utterance where a definite description occurs is not satisfied when the definite description is incomplete. It is, however, satisfied in the mini-world under consideration (Kuroda 1982). Incomplete definite descriptions, then, are to be interpreted with respect to some mini-world—not necessarily the same mini-world for all incomplete descriptions in a given sentence,

as Kuroda emphasized. In ‘He went up to the attic and opened the window’, the first description, ‘the attic’, is interpreted with respect to a mini-world (it is the attic of a certain house) and the second description, ‘the window’, is interpreted with respect to another mini-world (it is the window of the attic, not the window of the house).

When a definite description is complete, the existence and uniqueness condition is satisfied *simpliciter*, *i.e.* satisfied in the world rather than simply in a relevant fragment of the world. Complete definite descriptions, therefore, are not relative to mini-worlds, but this does not mean that they are not relative to anything. Like incomplete definite descriptions, they are relative to the domain of discourse.

Roughly, the domain of discourse is that with respect to which the speaker presents his or her utterance as true. When a definite description is incomplete, the domain of discourse is a mini-world: the speaker presents his utterance, *e.g.* ‘The president is a Socialist’, as true with respect to a certain mini-world, say, the mini-world consisting of the contemporary French political situation. (In another context, the utterance would be presented as true with respect to some other mini-world, and the reference of the description would change accordingly.) But the domain of discourse need not be a mini-world; it may be a full-fledged world. If the speaker utters ‘The president of France in 1986 is bald’, intending to make a straightforward assertion, *i.e.* to describe what is actually the case, then the domain of discourse is the actual world, because the speaker presents what he says as true with respect to the actual world. Sometimes, the domain of discourse is a world other than the actual world, and sometimes it is a ‘world’ only in an extended sense—for example a belief-world or a fictional world. In ‘John is definitely paranoid. Everybody wants to kill him!’ the second sentence is not intended to describe the actual world, but to describe John’s belief-world, *i.e.* the world as it is according to John. In general, a simple utterance like ‘The F is G’ can be used in discourse to do something other than make an assertion about the actual world; the sentence can be used to state the ‘absurd’ conclusion of a *reductio ad absurdum*, or to represent someone else’s views, or to tell a story, or to describe a counterfactual possibility. . . . The actual world is only one among many possible domains of discourse.

Note that mini-worlds themselves are not necessarily fragments of the actual world; they can be fragments of whatever counterfactual world or quasi-world is under consideration.

The reference of a complete definite description depends on the domain of discourse exactly as it depends on the world of evaluation. If John believes that Carter is the president of the United States in 1986, then the description 'the president of the United States in 1986' refers to Carter with respect to John's belief-world. The following situation of discourse provides an example of a shift of reference induced by a change of domain: Peter wrongly believes that Ann is your sister, Ann is coming over and I say to you, ironically: 'Hey, "your sister" is coming over.' Although the utterance as a whole is about the actual world, the description 'your sister' is to be interpreted with respect to Peter's belief-world. In this context, the description refers to Ann, whereas in another context it would refer to Nicole, your actual sister.

Domains of discourse, then, are similar to possible worlds. But there is an important difference: domains of discourse, contrary to possible worlds, do not have to be complete, nor even consistent. This is why mini-worlds, and quasi-worlds such as belief-worlds or fictional worlds, are possible domains of discourse. This is also why all definite descriptions are domain-dependent, even though not all definite descriptions are world-dependent. 3 is the cube root of 27 in all possible worlds, but not in all domains of discourse (Peter may well think that 9 is the cube root of 27, and Peter's belief-world is a possible domain of discourse); it follows that the reference of 'the cube root of 27' is not the same in all domains of discourse even if it is the same in all possible worlds.²

The distinction between two sorts of context-dependence, viz. indexical dependence on the external context of speech and non-indexical dependence on the domain of discourse, sheds a new light on the Russell-Strawson controversy. Strawson, Russell insisted, identified two different problems, the problem of descriptions and the problem of context-dependence; this is a mistake, according to Russell, since it is easy to find descriptions

² My domains of discourse closely correspond to the 'mental spaces' of Fauconnier (1985); my debt to Fauconnier's work should be obvious throughout this paper.

that are not indexical—descriptions, in Russell's own terms, 'from which egocentricity is wholly absent' (Russell 1959:239). It can be replied, on behalf of Strawson, that indexicality (or 'egocentricity') and context-dependence are two different things, and that the reference of a definite description is always context-dependent even though not all descriptions are indexical. Even a complete definite description from which indexicality is wholly absent depends for its reference on the domain of discourse with respect to which it is intended to be interpreted. It is, of course, possible to specify the domain of discourse involved by adding to the sentence what Fauconnier (1985) calls a 'space-builder', *i.e.* a domain-indicator such as 'In John's mind. . .', which implies that the domain under consideration is the world of John's beliefs. But such semantic additions cannot fix the domain of discourse, which ultimately remains a pragmatic, contextual matter. This is what I will now try to explain.

Suppose I say that it is possible that P, or that John thinks that P; the expressions 'it is possible that. . .' or 'John thinks that. . .' have to be interpreted with respect to some domain of discourse. In the default case, the domain of discourse will be the actual world: the speaker will be understood as mentioning an actual possibility or an actual thought of John's. But if the domain of discourse is the world of Paul's beliefs, as could be made explicit by the addition of 'According to Paul' at the beginning of the sentence uttered, then what is said is not that something is *actually* possible or that John *actually* thinks something but rather that *according to Paul* something is possible or that *according to Paul* John thinks something. Now, besides the domain of discourse with respect to which the expressions 'it is possible that' or 'John thinks that' have to be interpreted, there is another domain involved. 'It is possible that' and 'John thinks that' are what Fauconnier calls space-builders, *i.e.* expressions which explicitly introduce a new domain of discourse, with respect to which the complement sentence is to be interpreted. The new domain thus introduced is a possible world in the case of 'It is possible that P' and it is John's belief-world in the case of 'John thinks that P': 'John thinks that P' says that P is true in the world of John's beliefs, and 'It is possible that P' say that P is true in some possible world. So we have two domains: the first

domain—the ‘parent’ in Fauconnier’s terminology—is the domain with respect to which the domain-indicator is interpreted, and the second is the domain which the domain-indicator explicitly introduces and with respect to which the complement sentence is interpreted.

Now, clearly, the second domain is a function of the first. Consider, for example, the domain-indicator ‘John thinks that. . .’: if it is interpreted with respect to the actual world, the domain of discourse introduced by the domain-indicator will be the world of John’s beliefs as they actually are; but if the domain we start with is the world of Paul’s beliefs rather than the actual world, then the new domain introduced by the domain-indicator will be the world of John’s-beliefs-according-to-Paul. In the same way, the ‘possible world’ introduced by the domain-indicator ‘it is possible that’ is a world possible with respect to the actual world if we start with the actual world; but if the domain we start with is Peter’s belief-world, then the possible world introduced by the domain-indicator is only ‘possible with respect to Peter’s beliefs’. With respect to the actual world, this world may well be an impossible world. So a domain-indicator, by itself, does not fix the domain of discourse it explicitly specifies; it only constrains it. The same domain-indicator will introduce different domains depending on the domain with respect to which it is interpreted. For this reason, domains of discourse remain an irreducibly pragmatic matter.

In this section, I have tried to show (1) that an utterance is interpreted (and intended to be interpreted) with respect to one or several domains of discourse, (2) that the domains of discourse involved are always a pragmatic matter, even if they are explicitly specified, and (3) that the reference of a definite description—whether complete or incomplete, rigid or non-rigid—depends on the domain of discourse and thus ultimately on the context. However, it may still be argued that this dependence of the reference of a description on the domain of discourse and therefore on the context is a trivial form of context-dependence, which does not affect the proposition expressed, except perhaps in some cases (when the description is used referentially). In the next section, I will show that it is not the case; I will show that the proposition expressed, or, rather, ‘what is said’ by means of a sentence including a definite

description depends on the domain of discourse with respect to which the description is interpreted.

III

When a definite description is incomplete, the context has what we might call a ‘completing role’, it provides something that the sentence does not provide. But what? How in this case do sentence-meaning and context combine to yield what is said?

There are two theories on the market that try to answer this question: the elliptical theory and the direct reference theory. According to the former, incomplete descriptions, and the sentences which include them, are elliptical; they are abbreviations for longer sentences and longer descriptions. ‘The president’, for example, is short for ‘the president of the USA in 1986’. Since the elliptical sentence could abbreviate many different sentences—say, S1, S2 and S3—it is ambiguous: it is either synonymous with S1, or synonymous with S2, or synonymous with S3. The context disambiguates it by making manifest the complete sentence of which it is an abbreviation. The context-dependence of incomplete definite descriptions, therefore, is a variety of (trivial) language-dependence: the context helps to fix the relevant meaning of an otherwise ambiguous sentence. Once the meaning is fixed, the context is no longer necessary to determine the proposition expressed, and this is why this form of context-dependence is trivial.

This theory has been criticized. Howard Wettstein raised the following objection: even when the context is given, there still is a number—often an indefinite number—of complete descriptions which could fit the intended reference of the incomplete description. ‘When one says, *e.g.*, “The table is covered with books”, the table the speaker has in mind can be more fully described in any number of ways, by the use of any number of non-synonymous, uniquely denoting descriptions. . . . The question now arises, which of these more complete (or Russellian) descriptions (or conjunctions of such descriptions) is *the correct one*, the one that actually captures what the speaker intended by his use of the indefinite definite description “the table”.’ Wettstein’s answer is that ‘none of these Russellian descriptions is *the correct one*’, because in many cases there is nothing in the circumstances of utterance or in the intentions of the speaker that would allow

us to decide on one of these complete descriptions as the correct one. I agree with Wettstein that it would be 'implausible in the extreme to suppose that in fact one of these descriptions captures what the speaker intended but that we cannot, even with the help of the speaker himself, come to know which description that is.' So 'it is simply a mistake to view indefinite definite descriptions as elliptical for uniquely denoting descriptions' (Wettstein 1981:246–247).

So far so good. But now we have to account for the fact that a determinate assertion is made by means of a sentence including an incomplete definite description. Wettstein's own account is the following: 'When one says, "the table is covered with books", for example, in the conspicuous presence of a single table, the context fails to reveal some Russellian description as lurking behind the utterance of "the table"; the context does reveal, however, *which* item is in question' (Wettstein 1981:248). A sentence with an incomplete definite description expresses, according to Wettstein, a singular proposition, consisting of an object (the contextual reference of the description) and a concept (the concept expressed by the predicate in the sentence). There is no 'individual concept' corresponding to the incomplete description, as there would be if it were the abbreviation of a complete description.

Some people dislike the doctrine of direct reference and reject the very idea of a 'singular proposition'. I do not. I think, however, that Wettstein is mistaken and that singular propositions and direct reference are of no use here. A singular proposition is supposed to be expressed when the term in subject-position is a directly referential term, *e.g.* a demonstrative expression or a proper name. Definite descriptions are not directly referential terms, but they have a directly referential use; so it may be said that, when a definite description is used referentially, the proposition expressed is a singular proposition with the object referred to as a constituent. By contrast, an utterance with an attributive description expresses a general proposition. Now the reason why the doctrine of direct reference is of no use here is that—as Wettstein himself points out—incomplete descriptions can be used attributively as well as referentially; but if the contribution of an incomplete definite description to the proposition expressed was always the object

referred to (rather than an hypothetical individual concept), this would imply that incomplete definite descriptions are always used referentially!

I suggest the following solution (in the spirit, I think, of Wettstein's own suggestions). When a determinate assertion is made by means of a sentence including an incomplete definite description, what the context provides is neither an identification of the complete description abbreviated (since, as Wettstein has shown, an incomplete description is not an abbreviated complete description), nor an identification of the reference (since the reference of an attributive description may well remain unidentified); what the context provides is an identification of the domain of discourse involved. Once the domain of discourse is identified, it becomes in principle possible to identify the reference, since the existence and uniqueness condition is satisfied in this domain. But it is not necessary for understanding the utterance to identify the reference, unless the description is used referentially.

The important point is that nothing determinate is said by a sentence involving an incomplete definite description unless the relevant domain of discourse is identified. Even if the proposition expressed does not include the reference of the description (which may be used attributively), what is said is a function of the domain of discourse involved. This is quite easy to prove: You don't contradict yourself if you say 'The president, whoever he is, is bald' about the president of the US and 'The president, whoever he is, is not bald' about the president of France; but you would, if it were the case that two utterances of 'The F, whoever he is, is G', interpreted with respect to different domains of discourse, said the same thing or expressed the same proposition.

The same thing holds, I think, for 'complete' definite descriptions. To know what is said by 'Your sister is coming', you have to know with respect to which domain the description 'your sister' is interpreted. When I say '“Your sister” is coming', as in the example of irony mentioned above, what I say is different from what I say 'normally' by means of the sentence 'Your sister is coming'. The two utterances do not have the same truth-conditions. I don't contradict myself if I say both '“Your sister” is coming' (about your alleged sister) and 'Your sister is not coming' (about your real sister). In this case also, the domain

of discourse involved is a determinant of what is said. It follows that when the domain of discourse is not fixed—that is, at the level of sentence-meaning—nothing determinate is said nor could be said.

To this view, it may be objected that on the ‘ironical’ reading what the speaker means and what he says are divergent. Whether the utterance is understood normally or ironically, a classical Gricean would perhaps argue, what is ‘literally’ said is that your (real) sister is coming; what is distinctive about the ironical case is simply that the utterance conveys something other than what it says. The basic idea is that, indexicality aside, the sentence as such possesses a ‘literal’ interpretation, *i.e.* a set of truth-conditions associated to the sentence by the semantics of the language. An utterance of this sentence necessarily has these truth-conditions, but what may happen is that what the speaker wishes to convey is different from the proposition literally expressed.

I agree that what I have called the ‘ironical’ reading of the utterance is not its ‘normal’ reading; on the normal reading, the description ‘your sister’ is interpreted with respect to the actual world. But I do not agree with the claim that this normal reading is ‘literal’ (*i.e.* linguistically proper) and the ironical reading, by contrast, ‘non-literal’. It would be wrong to think that the literal interpretation of a sentence such as ‘Your sister is coming’—or of any sentence, for that matter—is its interpretation with respect to the actual world. Which domain of discourse is involved is, as I said, a pragmatic matter. The interpretation with respect to the actual world may be the ‘default’ interpretation, it is nevertheless a contextual interpretation, depending on a certain identification of the domain of discourse involved. At the level of sentence-meaning, the domains of discourse are not fixed: it is the context of utterance which determines the domain of discourse. If the domain of discourse is the actual world, we have the ‘normal’ interpretation; if not, we have another interpretation, for example the ‘ironical’ interpretation. Both contextual interpretations are ‘literal’ in the sense that they remain within the limits set by the meaning of the sentence, which says nothing of the domain of discourse involved. But neither can be identified with the linguistic meaning of the sentence.

At this point, however, another objection may be raised. If the difference between an ironical and a serious utterance is taken to be a 'pragmatic' difference in discourse domain, it may be argued, why not leave it at that? Why add to this pragmatic difference an alleged difference in truth-conditions, in 'what is said'? To be sure, in the case of incomplete definite descriptions, the domain of discourse makes a difference to what is said; but this is because the domain of discourse is needed to determine what is said when the description is incomplete. This is not so when the definite description is complete: an utterance with a complete definite description in subject position expresses a proposition, *i.e.* a function from possible worlds to truth-values; and the context specifies the domain of discourse, *i.e.* the world (or quasi-world) with respect to which this proposition is presented as true. So, as far as complete descriptions are concerned, we have the proposition expressed on the one hand, and the domain of discourse with respect to which it is presented as true on the other; there is no reason to believe that the former depends on the latter, contrary to what happens in the case of incomplete definite descriptions.

This objection neglects an important fact; the fact, noted above, that any predicate in the sentence can be relative to a different domain of discourse. The whole sentence 'Your sister is coming' can be interpreted with respect to the actual world, or with respect to some other domain of discourse; the utterance, for example, could be intended as a piece of 'free indirect speech'. But there may also be, as in the ironical case, two domains involved: the description 'your sister' is then interpreted with respect to one domain and the predicate 'is coming' with respect to another. On this reading, the utterance "'Your sister" is coming' says that the person who is *believed by Peter to be* your sister is coming. The sentence as such does not tell us how many different domains are involved, since, at the level of sentence-meaning, domains are not fixed. Following Kuroda, we can represent this indeterminacy at the level of sentence-meaning by means of variables ranging over domains of discourse. Instead of a sentence 'The F is G', we then have: 'The F_i is G_j , where i and j are domain-variables, to be contextually instantiated. Now, my point is the following: you cannot state the truth-conditions of the utterance if you do not know, at least,

how many domains are involved. If a single domain is involved—if $i=j$ (the default-case, undoubtedly)—then the conditions that have to be satisfied in a world W for the utterance to be true in W are: that a unique object be F , and that it be G . But if two domains are involved—if $i \neq j$ —the truth-conditions of the utterance no longer are the conditions that must be satisfied in a world for the utterance to be true in that world: they are conditions that must be satisfied in a pair of worlds for the utterance to be true with respect to this pair of worlds. When $i \neq j$, the utterance is true with respect to an ordered pair of worlds if and only if there is a unique F in the first world of the pair and it (or, rather, its counterpart) is G in the second world. The truth-conditions of the utterance are not the same when $i=j$ and when $i \neq j$; but it is only when the domain-variables are contextually instantiated that we know whether $i=j$ or $i \neq j$. The truth-conditions, therefore, depend on the domains of discourse contextually involved.

It is, of course, possible to stipulate that the truth-conditions must be independent of all information concerning the domains of discourse, and to state the truth-conditions of 'The F is G ' accordingly. We can, for example, say that the sentence 'The F is G ' has the following truth-conditions: it is true with respect to an ordered pair of (*possibly identical*) worlds iff there is an x which is uniquely F in the first world of the pair and x (or x 's counterpart) is G in the second world of the pair. On that view, the proposition expressed by a sentence with n predicate-expressions will not be a function from possible worlds to truth-values, but a function from ordered sets of n (possibly identical) possible worlds to truth-values. This very abstract notion of proposition, however, does not correspond to the standard notion of 'what is said'. In principle, knowledge of what is said makes it possible to determine whether or not what is said is consistent, and whether or not it is consistent with something else that may be said. But with the abstract notion of proposition, we cannot do this. I do not know whether the utterance 'My sister is not my sister' is consistent or self-contradictory, unless I know whether or not the two domains involved are identical; I do not know whether 'My sister is coming' and 'My sister is not coming' are mutually consistent unless I possess this same bit of information about the domains

of discourse involved. So even if we accept that the meaning of a sentence is a set of truth-conditions or a proposition at this very abstract level, we have to distinguish this abstract proposition from 'what is said' by an utterance of the sentence, exactly as we distinguish the meaning of an indexical sentence from what is said by an utterance of this sentence.

Intensional contexts provide further evidence that what is said, in the ordinary sense, is a function of the domain of discourse. Everybody agrees that what is said by a sentence such as 'Oedipus believes that his mother has no children' is different when the description 'his mother' is given an opaque reading and when it is given a transparent reading. On the opaque reading, the sentence ascribes to Oedipus an inconsistent belief; not so on the transparent reading. If we admit that what is said may be a function of the domains pragmatically involved, such ambiguities no longer raise a problem, as Fauconnier has convincingly shown. In particular, we do not have to say that the sentence itself is ambiguous (a move which would be objectionable on familiar grounds). At the level of sentence-meaning, we have domain-variables: Oedipus believes_{*i*} that his mother_{*j*} has no children_{*k*}. Let's assume that Oedipus is a real-world character and that the sentence is intended to describe his actual beliefs: then $i =$ the actual world. The most natural interpretation for k , the domain with respect to which the predicate 'has no children' is interpreted, takes it to be the domain introduced by 'Oedipus believes that', viz. Oedipus's (actual) belief-world. That being so, we have (at least) two possible interpretations for j : either $j = i$, or $j = k$. These interpretations correspond respectively to the transparent and the opaque reading of the description 'his mother', which denotes either Oedipus's real mother (whether or not he thinks she is his mother) or the person whom he takes to be his mother (whether or not she actually is his mother). In this and related cases of so-called referential ambiguity, the sentence is *not* ambiguous, but what is said by an utterance of the sentence crucially depends on the domains involved.

IV

Let me summarize what I hope I have shown in this paper. Definite descriptions, whether complete or incomplete, are

referentially context-dependent in a non-trivial sense. Since indexicals and proper names (which can be viewed as a variety of indexicals, a point which I did not argue in this paper) also are referentially context-dependent in a non-trivial sense, ordinary language philosophers are vindicated: singular reference *is* a pragmatic, contextual matter. This is true not only of reference in the 'strong' sense, but also of the sort of 'weak' reference characteristic of definite descriptions in their attributive use. The reason why non-indexical reference is also context-dependent is that it is dependent on a more basic sort of reference which *is* irreducibly pragmatic. This 'proto-reference', which has not hitherto been sufficiently noticed, is the reference any utterance makes to the domain of discourse (or the domains of discourse) with respect to which it is intended to be interpreted.³

³ Thanks to D. Carter, C. Cullen, P. Jacob, P. Kay and D. Sperber for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

REFERENCES

- Cohen, L. Jonathan (1980), 'The Individuation of Proper Names', in Zak van Straaten (ed.), *Philosophical Subjects, Essays presented to P. F. Strawson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), pp. 140-163.
- Fauconnier, Gilles (1985), *Mental Spaces: Aspects of Meaning Construction in Natural Language*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Gardiner, Alan H. (1932), *The Theory of Speech and Language*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Husserl, Edmund (1913), *Logische Untersuchungen, Zweiter Band*, Halle: Niemeyer.
- Kuroda, S. Yuki (1982), 'Indexed Predicate Calculus', *Journal of Semantics* 1:1, pp. 43-59.
- Russell, Bertrand (1959), 'Mr Strawson on Referring', in *My Philosophical Development* (London: Allen & Unwin), pp. 238-245.
- Wettstein, Howard K. (1981), 'Demonstrative Reference and Definite Descriptions', *Philosophical Studies* 40, pp. 241-257.