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REFERENCE AND PRESUPPOSITION

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Abstract

The topic of this paper is the logical analysis and translation of definite descriptions (structures of the form 'the *F*'), in particular Bertrand Russell's Theory of Descriptions, as put forth in "On Denoting" (1905). I argue in favor of an opposing theory, a presuppositional analysis of definite descriptions that fits in the tradition of Frege and Strawson, building upon the recent work of Heim and Elbourne. I argue that a definite description has a referential function that is supported by presuppositions of existence and uniqueness located *outside* of the analyzed sentence. Using a series of example sentences, I show that a presuppositional analysis handles the logic of ordinary language in a manner superior to a Russellian analysis, produces more natural readings of embedded sentences containing definite descriptions, explains why definite descriptions function in a consistent way across different types of sentences, and provides a much better account of the logical commitments of *using* referential terms. After providing background on Russell's theory and its criticisms, I review and analyze Elbourne's examples of sentences embedding definite descriptions in non-doxastic propositional attitudes or the antecedents of conditionals. I then present and analyze my own examples involving embedding within disjunctions and within two kinds of non-statement: questions and commands. I compare the effects of embedding sentences using proper names—another kind of referential term. I then analyze some logical consequences of Russellian analysis, and answer a potential Russellian objection.

Keywords: definite descriptions, Russell, reference, presupposition, logic.

Introduction

Upon its publication in 1905, Russell's theory of definite descriptions, as explicated in

"On Denoting," became the dominant paradigm for the logical translation of descriptions.

A definite description is any phrase of the form 'the *F'*. It must begin with 'the' and

specify exactly one referent. Definite descriptions are to be distinguished from indefinite

descriptions such as 'a man' or 'some man.' (From here on, when I use 'description' I

mean 'definite description.') The Russellian translation interprets sentences of the form in

(i) using a logical paraphrase such as (ii), (iii), or (iv), and the predicate logic translation

in (v):

(i) The *F* is *G.* (e.g., 'The present king of France is bald.')

(ii) There exists one and only one thing that is present king of France, and that
thing is bald.[1]

(iii) There is exactly one present king of France and he is bald.[2]

(iv) There exists a unique present king of France and he is bald.[3]

(v) $(\exists x)(Kx \bullet (y)(Ky \supset y=x) \bullet Bx)$ (Kx = x is the present king of France; Bx = x
is bald)[4]

Instead of using a simple subject-predicate interpretation, as the grammar of the English

language sentence suggests, Russell interprets such sentences as *quantifications.* Our first

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[1] This is a considerably refined paraphrase of the version Russell makes use of in "On Denoting" (1905, p. 482).

[2] Elbourne (2010) relies extensively on this paraphrase style.

[3] For brevity and readability, I shall generally use the paraphrase style of (iii) or (iv) in my example sentences. Readers who believe these renderings to be inaccurate or unfavorable to Russell's theory are welcome to substitute the structure in (ii) into any of the Russell-translated readings in my examples. I am confident the results will be the same.

[4] Read as: There exists at least one x such that x is the present king of France; and for any y, if y is the present king of France then y is identical to x (i.e., x is unique); and x is bald.

question is not "What is the subject?" but "How many things are we talking about?" Russell answers that we are claiming existence for *at least one thing* that satisfies the conditions: being present king of France, being unique, and being bald.

Significantly for our purposes, Russell argues that the *existence* and *uniqueness* of a bald present king of France are *explicit assertions* located *within* the sentence in which the definite description occurs. Frege (1892), Strawson (1950), and others have argued for a different kind of analysis of such sentences, treating them as straightforward subject-predicate relations that *presuppose* the existence and uniqueness of the thing referred to by their subject terms. They treat existence and uniqueness as *implicit assumptions* located *outside* the sentence (but triggered from within it). These differences in how the two theories handle existence and uniqueness information have consequences for both logical translation and deduction.

In this paper, I shall argue in favor of a presuppositional analysis of definite descriptions that fits in the tradition of Frege and Strawson and that builds upon the recent work of Heim and Elbourne. I shall argue that definite descriptions have a referential function that is supported by presuppositions of existence and uniqueness located *outside* of the analyzed sentence. Using a series of example sentences, I shall show that a presuppositional analysis handles the logic of ordinary language in a manner superior to a Russellian analysis. A presuppositional analysis produces more natural readings of embedded sentences containing definite descriptions, explains why definite descriptions function in a consistent way across different types of sentences (including questions and commands), and provides a much better account of the logical commitments of *using* referential terms.

My argument is *not* that Russell's translations are too cumbersome or awkward for ordinary language use. (They are, but so are other kinds of very useful technical translations such as those used in math or physics.) Nor do I fault them for sacrificing many of the natural-language nuances of the sentences they translate. Russell did not intend his theory to be faithful to ordinary language. I *do* argue that the failure of Russell's theory to capture certain logical structures of ordinary language has *logical* consequences. The most salient among them is that in some cases Russell's system does not adequately capture and evaluate the existence and uniqueness commitments of using referential terms. This results in "stray" presuppositions that are blind spots for anyone using a Russellian translation, but that will be discerned by someone using a presuppositional analysis.

My paper is organized as follows. After giving some additional background on Russell's theory, major criticisms of the theory, and Russell's responses, I shall review and analyze Elbourne's examples of sentences involving definite descriptions in non-doxastic propositional attitudes[5] or the antecedents of conditionals[6] (2010). I shall then present and analyze my own examples involving embedding within inclusive and exclusive disjunctions, and two kinds of non-statement: questions and commands. I shall draw a comparison with the effects of embedding sentences using proper names, another

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[5] *Propositional attitudes* are sentences expressing an attitude toward a proposition *p* using the word 'that'. For instance, I may 'believe that *p*', 'know that *p*', 'wonder if it is true that *p*', 'wish that *p*', etc. *Non-doxastic* propositional attitudes are those that do not pertain to belief or knowledge (of the examples above, the latter two are non-doxastic).

[6] *Conditionals* are statements of the form 'If *p* then *q*.' In this case, *p* is the *antecedent,* and *q* is the *consequent.*

kind of referential term. I shall then analyze some logical consequences of Russellian analysis, and answer a potential Russellian objection to my argument.

I should mention at the outset that I think Russell's theory of descriptions was an ingenious solution to Russell's Paradox (which I describe below), and I believe it deserves great distinction for being the first theory to formalize the existence and uniqueness information conveyed by the use of definite descriptions.[7] I also believe Russell's theory works in a great many cases, and that it has been tremendously fruitful for the study of logic. But it is possible to greatly admire Russell as a logician, to believe the fame and pre-eminence of his theory are well-deserved, and to nonetheless recognize that it has flaws.

I shall be making much use of the idea of presupposition and related ideas in this paper, so before we proceed I shall give the reader a few broad definitions. A *presupposition* is a kind of unstated or implicit assumption, detectable only by its effects on other, explicit sentences. To *presuppose* is to make this kind of assumption. Presuppositions are generally handled under the umbrella of informal logic, because formal systems are designed to handle explicit statements. If we are able to detect a presupposition in our reading of a sentence or sentence structure, the presupposition is said to *project* from within that sentence or structure. Presuppositions can project from any kind of sentence, not just declarative sentences. (This will become important in our analysis later.) *Embedding* is simply the placement of one sentence within another. In my analysis, we shall be embedding Russell-translatable sentences within larger structures to

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[7] This is true whatever the nature of that information turns out to be. Seen from the opposing (presuppositional) analysis, Russell's theory is perhaps the first attempt to formally capture and evaluate what is really *presuppositional* information, but which his theory treats as *asserted* content.

see if presuppositions project from these embeddings. If certain words or phrases consistently project presuppositions in certain usage contexts, they are said to be *triggers* for presuppositions. One of the central premises of the Frege-Strawson argument is that definite descriptions are presupposition triggers.

I shall use the word 'commitment' in two closely related senses. The first is what I shall call *assertive* commitment. When we make assertions, we are committed to their truth. We are committed to the positions we have just taken about the facts. We are also committed to the implications of our assertions (e.g., if we assert 'If *p* then *q*' and also assert '*p*', we are committed to '*q*'.) And we are committed to any presuppositions evident in our assertions. It is the job of logic to help us see these implications and presuppositions. The other sense of 'commitment' I shall use is *ontological* commitment, the commitment to something's *existence* or *being.* (This is really a special case of assertive commitment.) When we *use* nouns or noun phrases, we generally commit ourselves to their having some kind of reference (i.e., to the position that their referents *exist*, at least as subjects of discourse). This is why we have techniques for mentioning words without using them, such as enclosure in single quotes. The sentence "God is a three-letter word" carries different ontological commitments than "'God' is a three-letter word." Both the Russell and Frege-Strawson camps agree that the use of definite descriptions involves ontological commitments, but disagree about their nature and the best way to incorporate them into formal logic.

Although I argue that definite descriptions involve presuppositions about both existence and uniqueness, my examples will focus on the existence presupposition. This is partly in the spirit of brevity, as it would easily double the number of examples if I

gave attention to exposing both kinds of presupposition. It is partly because I am building on examples from Heim and Elbourne that focus on existence. And it is partly because the existence presupposition is the more important of the two. For a thing to be unique, it must first *exist.* Nonetheless, the bulk of my argument applies to uniqueness as well.[8]

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[8] See p. 27n for one example of how to apply Elbourne-style sentence pairings to expose uniqueness.

Part 1: Background

1.1   Russell's Theory of Descriptions

Russell's theory of descriptions grew out of his work on *Principia Mathematica*, which

he co-authored with Alfred North Whitehead and published in three volumes during

1910-1913. The *Principia* was to provide a logical foundation for number theory, and

thus for mathematics as a whole. In 1903, Russell encountered a seemingly

insurmountable puzzle that came to be known as Russell's Paradox: Consider the class of

all classes that do not contain themselves. Does this class contain itself? If it *does* contain

itself, then it ceases to meet the requirements of inclusion in the set, and therefore it does

not contain itself. And if it *does not* contain itself, then it meets the criterion for inclusion

in itself, and thus *does* contain itself. Either way, it seems to both contain *and* to not

contain itself. Such a contradiction is fatal to any logical system that produces it.

At the heart of Russell's Paradox was a troublesome definite description: 'the

class of all classes that do not contain themselves.' Russell's theory of descriptions

needed to do the translation work required in the *Principia,* but it also needed to

circumvent the Paradox (Monk, 1996, 176). How did it accomplish this? It may help us to

return to the simpler example with which we began: 'The present king of France is bald.'

Is this statement true or false? It gives us pause because it contains a non-entity as its

subject. There *is* no such entity as the present king of France. Indeed, France has not had

a monarchy since the early 19th Century. But does this absence of a subject render the

sentence false, nonsensical—or something else? Russell holds that the sentence is false,

and that we can come to this evaluation by interpreting the definite description in a certain way. According to his method, 'The present king of France is bald' translates roughly into the statement 'There exists one and only one individual who is present king of France, and he is bald.' And this statement is false because there *is* no individual who is present king of France. For Russell, when the speaker uses a definite description in a statement, he is making additional *assertions* about the existence and uniqueness of the thing in question that must be conjoined to the claim expressed by the grammatical predicate (in this case, 'is bald'). Translating statements this way, we reveal their true logical form (1905, pp. 482-484).

Let us return to the Paradox. Russell's new method of translation allowed him to rephrase the statement 'The class of all classes that do not contain themselves, contains itself' into an existence claim about a certain kind of class. With the help of his hierarchical Theory of Types, which he developed in *Principles of Mathematics* (1903)*,* he could explain why all assertions containing this description must be false. In short, he believed that classes and their members could not be considered as members of the *same* class; classes can only have members ranking lower than themselves in the hierarchy of Types. The kind of class described by 'the class of all classes that do not contain themselves' cannot exist, because it cuts across the hierarchy of types in an impermissible way. And because any sentence containing this description claims that such a class exists, it must be false. If one were to strictly adhere to logical Types, the Paradox would simply never arise (Menzel, 1995, p. 817).

Russell's theory of descriptions thus allowed him to avoid the Paradox in *Principia.* It also helped him resolve some puzzles which were unsolvable under classical

logic. Sentences containing definite descriptions are too complex to translate into classical logic, a system that uses indivisible subject and predicate terms to represent the logical forms of sentences (e.g., 'All men are mortal' becomes 'All *S* is *P*'). One of the logical puzzles Russell uses his theory to solve in "On Denoting" involves the following dilemma: Either 'The present King of France is Bald' or 'The present King of France is not bald' must be true, because "By the law of the excluded middle, either '*A* is *B*' or '*A* is not *B*' must be true." But the present king of France does not exist, so neither proposition appears to be true (p. 485). However, if we render 'The present King of France is not bald' as 'There exists one and only one entity which is now King of France and is not bald', this will be false. In fact, using Russell's method, we can find both alternatives false for the same reason—the non-existence of a French monarch (p. 490).

Throughout "On Denoting" there is a strong focus on propositions as the primary units of meaning. Russell states that the central principle of his theory of descriptions is "that denoting phrases never have any meaning in themselves, but that every proposition in whose verbal expression they occur has a meaning" (p. 480). Descriptions by themselves are meaningless, but when they occur in a declarative sentence, they help *determine* the meaning of the proposition expressed by that sentence. A proposition is a kind of logical abstraction from a declarative sentence, because many different sentences can express the same proposition (including sentences from multiple languages). As Kaplan notes, "For Russell, his contemporaries, and those that preceded them, it is the realm of propositions, existing independently of language, that form the subject matter of logic" (p. 935). This means that meaning and truth are determined at the level of the proposition, not by smaller units like words or ideas, or by larger ones like Quine's "web

of belief," under which meaning and truth are determined by the interaction of our entire belief structure with empirical testing at its edges.[9] Suffice it to say that Russell believed that propositions are capable of being independently meaningful and independently testable.

For Russell and his followers, one key virtue of the theory is that it allows us to consider statements referring to a non-entity (such as 'the present king of France') false, thus preserving our philosophical realism.[10] Russell wrote: "There is only one world, the 'real' world… A robust sense of reality is very necessary in framing a correct analysis of propositions about unicorns, golden mountains, round squares, and other such pseudo-objects. In obedience to the feeling of reality, we shall insist that, in the analysis of propositions, nothing 'unreal' is to be admitted" (1903, p. 210). We can avoid other cumbersome strategies, such as populating a null class with non-entities, because we are able to hold that there are no unreal individuals.[11]

Another virtue Russell stressed is that in interpreting descriptions this way, we are breaking down things we know by description[12] into things we know by acquaintance—a

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[9] See W. V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951); or W. V. Quine and J. S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief* (1970).

[10] Specifically, Russell claims that all statements in which a non-entity has *primary occurrence* can be shown to be false. Primary occurrence is placement of a description within the main body of the sentence, which affords it the ability to affect the truth-value of the sentence. The description 'the present king of France' has primary occurrence in 'The present King of France is bald' because it is in a position to render the statement false. An example of a description having *secondary occurrence* would be 'Russell believes that the present king of France is bald.' This is true just in case Russell *does* believe the statement 'the present king of France is bald,' regardless of whether that statement itself is true or not. Russell describes secondary occurrence as placement within a proposition that is a *constituent* of the main proposition—for instance, in a propositional attitude (e.g., Russell believes that *x*, knows that *x,* wishes that *x*, etc.) (1905, pp. 489-492).

[11] Russell discusses the difficulties this strategy presents for Meinong's rival theory in "On Denoting" (pp. 482-483).

[12] Here 'description' is a broad term in Russell's epistemology, and should not be confused with 'definite description,' which is only one specific type of description (see Russell, 1912, Chapter 5).

kind of direct experience. We know by acquaintance "anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths" (1912, p. 18). Our descriptions allow us to refer to things with which we cannot be acquainted, for instance 'the point on Earth farthest from the North Pole' or 'the largest canyon on Mars.' In propositions about things that we do not know by acquaintance, but only by a definite description, the description itself is not a constituent of the proposition, but it must be interpreted into elements with which we *are* acquainted. In breaking our descriptions down by the method Russell prescribes, we are performing a kind of epistemological double-checking (1905, pp. 492-493).

In addition, by interpreting statements containing definite descriptions as existence claims, Russell saves a bivalent (two-valued) logic. Under Russell's logic, all meaningful, well-formed propositions must be either true or false; there is no third truth value or indeterminate truth status (Seuren, 2006, p. 591). As we shall see, other logicians (most notably Strawson) challenge this bivalence by calling for a different interpretation of descriptions, under which statements such as 'The present king of France is bald' are neither true nor false, due to a failure of reference in the grammatical subject.

Finally, Russell's logic was an eye-opener for some of his fellow logicians about issues of natural language grammar and logical form. For instance, in a rare moment of public praise, Russell's former student Wittgenstein wrote that "Russell's merit is to have shown that the apparent logical form of the proposition need not be its real form" (1922, 4.0031). Classical logic allowed itself to be bound by the standard subject-predicate form of simple declarative sentences in languages like English. The new predicate logic being developed by Russell, Frege, and others was free of this constraint.

Russell's move away from natural language grammatical form did come with a cost. It meant opening a rift between philosophers and linguists, and devaluing much information coming in from linguistics and anthropology—information ordinary language philosophers were eager to utilize, often in criticism of Russell's doctrines.

1.2   Criticisms of Russell's Theory

Russell's theory of descriptions enjoyed wide acceptance among logicians, not facing a serious challenge for nearly half a century after the publication of "On Denoting" (Neale, 2005, p. 810n). Not everyone was comfortable with Russell's handling of the issue of reference, however, or of his treatment of the existence and uniqueness information contained in definite descriptions. With the rise of ordinary language philosophy in the mid-20th Century, logicians became increasingly aware of the issues faced by tidy logical theories like Russell's when mapping onto the pragmatics of ordinary language usage.

P.F. Strawson's landmark paper "On Referring" (1950) was the first significant attack on Russell's theory of descriptions. Strawson raises many of the above issues, arguing that Russell's theory ignores the referring use of descriptions in favor of an ascriptive use; that it is incapable of dealing with incomplete definite descriptions such as "the table is covered with books," which are commonly used but fail to specify a literally unique referent; and that, contrary to Russell's interpretation, existence and uniqueness are *presupposed* by—rather than *asserted* in—sentences containing definite descriptions. In this section, I want to briefly recapitulate some of Strawson's criticisms and those of subsequent critics before developing my own.

1.2.1 Referring Uses of Definite Descriptions

Strawson argues for a broader and more pragmatic conception of definite descriptions, one in which *reference* (the "referring use") is the most important purpose for definite descriptions in ordinary language. Russell's theory does away with the referring function of the subject term because he effectively eliminates the subject term as a referential *unit* and replaces it with a set of assertions (about existence and uniqueness) required in constructing that term. But Strawson rejects Russell-style translations on the grounds that "referring… cannot be dissolved into any kind of assertion" (1950, p. 333).

According to Strawson, when we use a declarative sentence containing a definite description, its main purpose is to fulfill the requirements of referring, namely to forestall questions concerning whom or what you are talking about. Put more positively, one might think of a definite description as a set of directions guiding the attention of the reader or listener. Seen this way, 'The man in the fedora' gives us the same kind of instruction in the declarative sentence 'The man in the fedora likes cake' as it does in the imperative 'Give this piece of cake to the man in the fedora.' Strawson claims that the linguistic conventions for the referring use of an expression—particularly those dealing with the context of use—have been "neglected or misinterpreted by logicians" in favor of an emphasis on the study of ascriptive uses as typified by Russell's "On Denoting." Referential uses are those in which the speaker has some particular thing in mind as the object of the description, where ascriptive uses are about an abstract relation between things (i.e., "The thing with qualities A and B—*whatever it is*—also has quality C.") (pp. 335-338).

1.2.2   The Problem of Misdescription

Perhaps the most dramatic way of demonstrating this difference between referring and ascriptive uses Strawson identified is to show cases where reference succeeds even when the referring term is *inaccurate*. Because descriptions in Strawson's sense are primarily a *means* of reference, they may fulfill their referring function even if the qualities they attribute to an individual are incorrect. Keith Donnellan explores this possibility in some depth in "Reference and Definite Descriptions" (1966). For instance, the sentence 'Who is the man drinking a martini?' may convey a meaningful question even if the man in question holds a cocktail glass containing only water (pp. 287-289). Likewise, 'The man drinking a martini is my professor' may express a true statement. A description used referentially is merely "one tool for doing a certain job," and is thus interchangeable with other descriptions or with proper names. Donnellan contrasts this *referential* use with the *attributive* use (Russell's kind) wherein the qualities involved in the particular definite description are crucial to the statement's truth-value (pp. 285-286). In broad terms, Donnellan criticizes Russell for completely ignoring the former, and Strawson for largely ignoring the latter.

In the example involving the man drinking a martini, Donnellan gives us an example of a faulty description doing real work in the sentences it inhabits. He notes that in these cases "the speaker may say something true even though the description correctly applies to nothing." This is a different sense of truth than the literal kind Russell describes, and Donnellan suggests that it merits exploration (p. 298). Thus, one consequence of referential use arguments is that they either cause us to widen our concept of truth to allow for these cases, or pose a potential threat to logical bivalence because

they introduce a third truth-value.[13] Another is that they suggest an ambiguity between different *senses* in which definite descriptions can be used.

Perhaps the most powerful criticism of Donnellan's distinction comes from Saul Kripke in "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference" (1977). Kripke argues that the problem of misdescriptions might be simply a problem of pragmatics (i.e., an issue of use) rather than a semantic ambiguity. He notes that even if Russell translations are the semantically correct way of translating definite descriptions, the problem of misdescriptions could still arise because of a conflict between the speaker's (intended) reference and the semantic reference of the description.[14] Seen this way, misdescriptions are speech acts that may succeed *despite* violating the semantic meanings of the terms they employ.

Because misdescriptions semantically mis-specify their referents, they are in a sense as ambiguous as incomplete descriptions, which we shall explore below. If we grant Donnellan that something true was said about the man who was misdescribed as drinking a martini, and we take away the inaccurate information in the description, what is left is incomplete. 'The man (drinking a martini) is my professor' becomes simply 'The man is my professor.' The speaker intended to refer to a specific man, but his *unspoken* referential intentions are impossible to translate into logic. As we shall see in the next

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[13] Russell can also be seen as tugging at our conventional notions of truth and falsity. As Strawson noted, Russell asks us to judge those statements about 'the present king of France' as false, when our more natural reaction might be to scratch our heads or proceed directly to questioning the speaker's assumptions about French government (Strawson p. 330).

[14] There is a class of misdescriptions that *do* have semantic relevance: Those that influence changes in meaning over time. Kripke hinted at the importance of investigating them: "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. And this consideration may be one of the factors needed to clear up some puzzles in the theory of reference" (1977, p. 271).

section, statements such as 'The man is my professor' are vague when taken out of their usage context, and literally false under a Russell translation.

1.2.3   The Problem of Incomplete Descriptions

Statements such as 'The table is covered with books' are a problem for Russell translations. This statement is false under a Russell Translation because it is false that there exists one and only one table. Yet when these kinds of statements are used in a suitable context, our intuition is to judge them true (or perhaps false in the case it is *not* covered with books) (Strawson, 1950, p. 332). And we use this kind of "incomplete" description all the time. Many of our descriptions in daily life are not going to be uniquely specifying in Russell's sense, because we tacitly judge, on a case-by-case basis, just how much specifying information is required.

In *Philosophical Investigations,* Wittgenstein developed a concept of language use as game-like, our words interacting with much non-linguistic content according to certain rules specific to the language activity—the "game" we are playing. This "ground up" approach treats language as having certain roles within human activity as a whole. A simple sequence of moves in a language game might involve a builder calling out to another builder 'Slab!' and the other builder bringing a slab over from a pile of various construction materials (§2-§7) We can see how in a situation like this, the word 'slab' may be quite sufficient for achieving the desired result (as opposed to 'Bring me a slab!'). Likewise, we might prefer to use 'The table is covered with books' in situations where it will suffice, rather than 'the table standing on my living room floor at 2:03 PM on Tuesday, March 11, 2014, is covered with books' depending on how much of our

pointing has already been done with context clues and with our established conventions of speech.[15]

In the same vein, Strawson emphasized the "different roles or parts that expressions may play in language." He stressed the importance of what he called the "contextual requirement," the relation of the referring expression to the speaker and the context of use—and of linguistic rules or conventions (pp. 337-340). Considerations of context can help explain why 'The present king of France is bald' may have been true in 1731, but it cannot be so today; and why 'The table is covered with books' can be true when spoken to an audience in a room containing exactly one book-covered table.

In "Mr. Strawson on Referring" (1957), Russell stressed that he had already developed a theory dealing with sentences containing "egocentric words" (e.g., 'this,' 'I,' or 'present'), and that indeed, "what they refer to depends upon when and where they are used" (p. 386). He also argues that there are sentences from which egocentricity is wholly absent, such as 'The square-root of minus one is half the square-root of minus four' (p. 385). Granting Russell these points, we are still left with descriptions which are context-dependent but contain no egocentric words, such as 'The table is covered with books.' Instead, some information appears to be missing from these descriptions, and it is a subject of continuing debate how we are to fill in the missing information, and whether or not this is fatal to Russell's theory.[16]

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[15] Quine called this latter kind of sentence an 'eternal sentence.' Its terms are sufficiently specific to make its truth-value fixed and stable over any possible contexts of use (vs. 'occasion sentences,' the truth of which is context-dependent) (1990, pp. 78-79).

[16] Kripke (1977), while defending Russell's theory from Donnellan's referential-attributive distinction, mentioned he thought incompleteness could be a serious problem (p. 271). See also Wettstein (1981), Bach (1983), and Neale (1990) for examples of further debate in this area.

1.2.4 Presuppositional Arguments

We now turn to the class of criticisms in which I situate my own argument. The idea that using a definite description in a sentence indicates presuppositions about the existence and uniqueness of its referent is at least as old as Frege's "On Sense and Reference" (1892). Frege argued that while it was necessary for the referring terms in a sentence (whether simple or compound proper names, or descriptions) to actually *have* a reference in order for a sentence to be true, these presuppositions are not part of the *sense*[17] of the sentence involved. In the context of our discussion here, this means that the presuppositions are not part of the asserted content of the sentence indicating them, and thus do not figure directly into determining its truth-value—though a failed presupposition may make a sentence unusable (pp. 41-42).

By the same reasoning, Strawson argues that a sentence like 'The present king of France is wise' would be neither true nor false, because one's failure to refer to anyone causes one to fail to say anything that *can* be true or false. Russell claims that definite descriptions have a direct and specific effect on a sentence's truth-value. But in ordinary English usage, Strawson argues, the effect on truth-value is not always clear. Strawson claims 'The present king of France is wise' does not *assert* that there is a king of France, but rather provides some evidence that the speaker believes he exists (i.e., we sense that he presupposes this). Strawson argues that our first impulse upon hearing such a sentence

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[17] Frege's distinction between sense and reference can be roughly summarized as follows: The *sense* of a term is distinct from its *reference* in much the same way its *connotation* is distinct from its *denotation*. 'The man in the black hat' and 'the Chair of the Admissions committee' may refer to or denote the same person, but these descriptions are composed of words with entirely different meanings (usage histories, connotations). Many names or descriptions, each with different *senses,* may refer to the same object.

would not be to call it false, but perhaps to say it is neither true nor false, and then question the assumptions of the speaker if he persists in making the claim (1950, p. 330).

Russell's response to Strawson on this point illustrates his attitudes toward ordinary language philosophy. Russell rejects Strawson's argument that to call 'The present king of France is wise' false violates ordinary usage, because his purpose is not to remain faithful to ordinary usage, but to improve our language where necessary for use by philosophers. But Russell holds that Strawson and his kind

> are persuaded that common speech is good enough not only for daily life, but also for philosophy. I, on the contrary, am persuaded that common speech is full of vagueness and inaccuracy and that any attempt to be precise and accurate requires modification of common speech both as regards vocabulary and as regards syntax. Everybody admits that physics and chemistry and medicine each require a language which is not that of everyday life. I fail to see why philosophy, alone, should be forbidden to make a similar approach towards precision and accuracy (Russell, 1957, p. 387).

Indeed, Russell believes that "obstinate addiction to ordinary language in our private thoughts is one of the main obstacles to progress in philosophy" (1951, p. 694).

Russell argues that Strawson's claim is not necessarily in line with ordinary usage, either. "Suppose… in some country there was a law that no person could hold public office if he considered it false that the Ruler of the Universe is wise. I think an avowed atheist who took advantage of Mr. Strawson's doctrine to say that he did not hold this proposition false, would be regarded as a somewhat shifty character" (1957, p. 389).

As far as our intuitions about the truth or falsity of such statements, it will suffice to say that both thinkers can find some support for their theories in recent research. There appear to be cases where our intuition is to regard such statements as false, and cases where we are much more ambivalent about assigning truth-value (Schoubye, 2009).[18]

Russell is not being quite fair to Strawson's position here. It is certainly unflattering for Strawson to have underwritten the technicality behind which this "shifty character" hides. But an honest Strawsonian could just as easily say that it cannot be true that the Ruler of the Universe is wise, because there *is* no Ruler of the Universe. In the same essay, Russell concedes that the decision whether to designate such sentences as false or to assign them no truth-value is largely a matter of "verbal convenience" (pp. 388-389). So perhaps truth-value assignments are not really the root of the disagreement between the two thinkers, but merely its outgrowth.

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[18] Schoubye explores a variety of cases illustrating that our intuitive responses to statements containing non-denoting descriptions are complex, often depending on other cues in the sentence besides the description itself. In particular, intuitions of falsity depend heavily on these context cues (2009).

Part 2: Argument

2.1   An Ordinary Language Approach

Russell disdains ordinary language and desires an improved technical vocabulary for philosophy comparable to that of math or physics. But his theory of descriptions was intended to solve philosophical problems arising from a certain kind of structure *within* ordinary language. And it is unclear whether it is desirable or even possible to escape this connection to ordinary language.[19] After all, it would seem that ordinary language arguments are what the discipline of logic is supposed to study and improve. Physics has a technical vocabulary that assists the physicist with theoretical problems about the behavior of physical objects, but which must also stand up to carefully designed experiments. And it must help engineers and architects make real-world building decisions. Not only internal, formal consistency, but empirical testing against the observable phenomena studied by the discipline serves as a standard for refinement of the theory, and thus of the terminology. I believe philosophy of language will only achieve its goals if it retains this spirit of empiricism.

It is one thing for a philosopher to refine his terminology for precision and accuracy based on a study of the logical structures that occur in ordinary language, or to look within it and choose the most precise and accurate structures available; it is quite

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[19] It is not even clear that we can draw any hard lines between technical and lay vocabulary. It may be, as Wittgenstein suggests, that technical vocabularies are simply *suburbs* within ordinary language (1953, §14).

another to *change* the meaning of an ordinary language structure to solve a particular problem, or to suit the requirements of a formal system. This is what I believe Russell does, perhaps unintentionally, in the case of definite descriptions. A logician taking this course faces many difficulties. It is not simply that his theory will have only limited, technical application, or that he will have to do tortuous translations when he needs to deal with ordinary-language discourse. Such translation may be impossible, if his theory has introduced significant enough distortions. In the worst case, he may have "solved" the problem only because he has defined it away, thus obscuring the issue.

2.2   Location, Reference, and the Commitments of Use

Ordinary language objections to Russell's theory often focus on the fact that it violates the natural subject-predicate form of declarative sentences, or that it insists on calling sentences like 'The present king of France is bald' *false* because they contain non-denoting definite descriptions. I want to reframe the issue in terms of *location*. The difference between the Russell camp and the Frege-Strawson camp is a disagreement about *the location of the assumptions underlying definite descriptions*. Russell argues that they are part of the asserted contents of a sentence. Frege and Strawson argue that they are presupposed and are therefore *outside* its asserted contents. The result is that under the Frege-Strawson analysis, even if we are not fully committed to the truth of a statement (e.g., because it occurs in an embedded context), we are still bound by the presuppositions projected by subject terms used the sentence, including definite descriptions. Under the Russellian analysis, however, our commitment to the existence

and uniqueness of our subject term is directly tied to our commitment to the truth of the statement in which it occurs.

For Frege and Strawson, the purpose of definite descriptions is to achieve reference, and they are just one means to that end, along with proper names. The consequences of having a non-referring description are the same as having a non-referring proper name: We simply fail to forestall questions concerning whom or what we are talking about, and thus fail to say anything true or false. Under the Frege-Strawson model, there is no need to translate a definite description from a referential term into a series of claims. Rather, the presuppositions it triggers are simply identified and judged to be true or false independently.

By contrast, Russell's method of translating descriptions virtually eliminates reference. Kaplan notes: "There is something very odd about urging the epistemological importance of denoting at the beginning of a work whose purpose is to show that the propositions we entertain when we know, judge, suppose, etc. contain no denoting elements. Denoting is almost entirely absent from the ["On Denoting"] theory" (2005, 977). In effect, Russell replaces reference to 'The *F*' with the *preconditions* of reference to 'The *F*'. The Russell-analyzed sentence becomes a claim about the existence of a *variable* satisfying the conditions that statements containing expressions like 'the *F*' require (i.e., the existence and uniqueness of an *F*).

By breaking up definite descriptions, Russell's theory allows us to avoid earnestly *using* them as unified referential terms, and thus to avoid their presuppositional commitments. But this has the consequence that in some cases we no longer *see* those commitments and their consequences. It also can produce contradictory readings when

sentences containing definite descriptions are embedded within the scope of non-doxastic propositional attitudes, or the antecedents of conditionals, as Elbourne (2010) illustrates.

A presuppositional theory avoids this problem. If the existence and uniqueness claims underlying definite descriptions are projected *outside* the sentence, they are largely free of any effects of embedding the definite description within the scope of propositional attitudes, if-clauses, negations, or any other context where the speaker is not fully committed to the truth of the component statement. Because definite descriptions function similarly across a wide range of embedding contexts, their location ceases to be problematic.

2.3   Embedding Descriptions: Elbourne's Examples

I shall begin my analysis by reviewing three kinds of embedding contexts studied by Heim (1991) and Elbourne (2010). Heim produced several examples of sentences for which the Russellian analysis produced markedly counterintuitive results. These involved definite descriptions embedded within either non-doxastic propositional attitudes or the antecedents of conditionals (1991, pp. 493-494). Kripke briefly noted the same problem with non-doxastic propositional attitudes (2005, p. 1023), and Rothschild raised the issue with the antecedents of conditionals (2007, pp. 85-89). Elbourne (2010) produced new readings for sentences similar in structure to Heim's. Since Elbourne's examples are in some respects more refined than Heim's, I shall quote some of them as a basis for our further discussion of presuppositions. All of the example sentences in this section (i.e., sentences (1)-(13)) are Elbourne's (2010, pp. 2-7).

2.3.1 Non-Doxastic Propositional Attitudes

Consider the following sentences:

(1) Hans wants the ghost in his attic to be quiet tonight.

(2) Hans wonders whether the ghost in his attic will be quiet tonight.

Each features a definite description embedded within a propositional attitude that is *non-doxastic*. Hans does not *know* or *believe* that the ghost in his attic will be quiet tonight. Rather, in (1) Hans *desires that* it be true, and in (2) Hans *wonders whether* it is true.[20] Hence, Hans is not committed to the truth of the embedded sentence in (1) or (2). The Russell translation of the embedded sentence (3) would yield (4):

(3) The ghost in his attic will be quiet tonight.

(4) There is exactly one ghost in Hans's attic and it will be quiet tonight.

Thus, Russell translation would yield the following readings (among others) for (1) and (2):

(5) Hans wants there to be exactly one ghost in his attic and for it to be quiet tonight.

(6) Hans wonders whether the following is the case: there is exactly one ghost in his attic and it will be quiet tonight.

In the context of beliefs, if Hans *believes* 'The ghost in his attic will be quiet tonight,' it makes sense to say that he believes there is one and only one ghost in his attic and that it will be quiet tonight. But in contexts of hoping, wanting, etc., it is not intuitive

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[20] Problems "Quantifying In" to propositional attitudes were first examined in detail by Quine (1956), primarily issues of properly construing the scope of definite descriptions embedded in such attitudes. I use his paraphrasing of certain propositional attitudes as a guide here.

to say that Hans hopes or wants something to exist which is a unique ghost in his attic and that it will be quiet tonight. He seems to be *assuming* that there is a unique ghost in his attic, and to *want* it to be quiet tonight.

In response to criticisms by Kaplan (2005) and Neale (2005), Elbourne strengthens his case by "preceding the two sentences with a claim to not know the truth of a relevant proposition" (5). This throws presuppositions of existence in the succeeding sentence into sharp relief. If Hans tells us (7) and then goes on to tell us (8a) or (8b), is he being consistent?

(7) I am unsure whether there is a ghost in my attic.

(8) a. I am wondering whether there is an entity such that it is a ghost in my attic and nothing else is a ghost in my attic and it is being noisy.

b. I am wondering whether the ghost in my attic is being noisy.

Or if he tells us (7) but goes on to tell us (9a) or (9b)?

(9) a. I would like there to be an entity such that it is a ghost in my attic and nothing else is a ghost in my attic and it is quiet tonight.

b. I would like the ghost in my attic to be quiet tonight.

Elbourne's revised claim is that (8a) is compatible with doubt about a ghost being in the attic as expressed in (7), but (8b) is *not.* Likewise, (9a) is compatible with (7), but (9b) is not.

I add only that the Russell-translated (8a) and (9a) are compatible with doubt about a ghost in the attic because *they re-locate the claims about existence and uniqueness* to within the scope of a non-doxastic propositional attitude, thus reducing the

speaker's commitment to their truth. In (8a) and (9a), the untranslated description 'the ghost in my attic' triggers presuppositions of existence and uniqueness which project outside the scope of the propositional attitude, and thus preserve the speaker's commitment.

2.3.2   The Antecedents of Conditionals

Consider the following sentence (10), a conditional containing a definite description in the antecedent:

(10)   If the ghost in his attic is quiet tonight, Hans will hold a party.

A Russell-translated reading of (10) would yield (11).[21]

(11)   If there is exactly one ghost in his attic and it is quiet tonight, Hans will hold a party.

Again, in (10) the existence of a unique ghost in Hans's attic seems to be assumed, and only its quietness is in question. But (11) moves the existence/uniqueness claims into the (contingent, uncommitted) scope of the antecedent of the conditional. Elbourne frames these, too, by preceding them with doubtful sentences. Consider the following sentence pairs:

(12)   I do not know whether there are any ghosts in Hans's attic. But if the ghost in his attic is quiet tonight, he will hold a party.

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[21] Elbourne answers an objection that Russell-translated definite descriptions take obligatory wide scope over conditionals, establishing that in at least some cases, definite descriptions have a narrow scope restricted to the antecedent (2010, pp. 5-6).

(13)   I do not know whether there are any ghosts in Hans's attic. But if there is

exactly one ghost in his attic and it is quiet tonight, he will hold a party.

We detect a conflict in (12) because the speaker expresses doubt in the first sentence, but

goes on to presuppose what he just doubted in the second. However, in (13) the Russell-

translated antecedent is consistent with the doubt expressed in the preceding sentence. If

native English speakers detect a conflict in the untranslated (12), but not in the Russell-

translated (13), clearly something is being lost in translation: the presuppositions, which

are being subjected to explicit doubt when we move them into the antecedent. If we

reduce our commitment from asserting 'p' to asserting 'If p then q,' our commitment to

anything we take to be part of the assertion p is likewise reduced.[22]

2.4   Embedding Descriptions: Additional Contexts

I shall now present my own examples of additional kinds of embedding that bolster the

case for a presuppositional analysis. Heim and Elbourne have demonstrated that existence

presuppositions can be exposed in several cases where a definite description is embedded

in a non-doxastic propositional attitude or the antecedent of a conditional. I shall utilize

Elbourne's technique of sentence pairing to analyze examples involving another kind of

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[22] Though Elbourne (2010) restricts his analysis to the presupposition of existence, his technique can easily be adapted to expose uniqueness presuppositions in the examples throughout this paper, by substituting a different kind of initial sentence. Consider the following adapted versions of (12) and (13) above, involving definite descriptions embedded in the antecedent of a conditional:

(12) a. I am not sure how many ghosts there are in Hans's attic. But if the ghost in his attic is quiet tonight, Hans will hold a party.

(13) a. I am not sure how many ghosts there are in Hans's attic. But if there is exactly one ghost in his attic and it is quiet tonight, Hans will hold a party.

In each pair, the initial sentence explicitly doubts any presupposition of uniqueness, and we see a conflict if our speaker continues as in (12a), but not as in (13a), in which a Russell translation locates our uniqueness claim under the antecedent, removing its teeth.

statement, the disjunction. I shall then examine two kinds of non-declarative sentence: questions and commands. What they have in common is that they are what I call a *non-committed context*: that is, a context in which there is qualification, doubt, or outright denial of the truth of the atomic statement containing the definite description—or a context which is by its nature non-assertive (e.g., questions and commands), and is thus non-committal about the truth of embedded statements.[23]

In order to compare the presuppositional analysis of definite descriptions to Russell's analysis, we need to examine many kinds of embedding contexts where we can plausibly generate a Russell translation for comparison. My examples are designed to be taken in conjunction with Elbourne's, and to provide us with a wide range of embedding contexts by which to draw our comparison. In the examples that follow, I shall demonstrate the versatility and broad explanatory power of a presuppositional analysis, its ability to produce more natural readings than the Russellian analysis, and its ability to better account for the commitments of using definite descriptions. I shall argue that the logic of Russell translations should hold even under embeddings in non-declarative sentences, and that its failure to do so is a significant problem for the theory.

2.4.1   Disjunctions: Inclusive and Exclusive

Disjunctions are not usually considered an embedding context *per se*. But logically, disjunctions are closely related to conditionals, which we have already examined as fruitful embedding contexts.[24] And disjunctions do represent a kind of non-committed

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[23] Indeed, commands such as 'Make *p* the case!' strongly suggest that *p* is not already the case.
[24] By the rule of replacement in natural deduction called Implication, the disjunction '~p v q' is logically equivalent to the conditional 'p ⊃ q.'

context, because they do not require that both disjuncts (the statements on either side of the 'or') be true.

In the case of *inclusive* disjunctions (the kind used in sentential and predicate logic) at least one of the disjuncts must be true for the disjunction to be true, but neither disjunct *needs* to be true as long as the other is true (i.e., either *p* is true or *q* is true—or both). Consider the following example involving an inclusive disjunction (15a, 15b) preceded by a presupposition-denying sentence (14):

(14)   I do not know whether there are any ghosts in Hans's attic.

(15)   a. Either the ghost in his attic is quiet tonight, or Hans is using earplugs while he studies.

b. Either there is exactly one ghost in his attic and it is quiet tonight, or Hans is using earplugs while he studies.

Either side of (15a) or (15b) may be true, or both. But if the speaker first asserts (14), then (15a), we can sense a conflict. But a speaker starting with (14) can continue appropriately to Russell-translated (15b), because his doubts in (14) cause no conflict with his very hypothetical claim about the ghost situation in the left disjunct of (15b) (though he may be involved in a very curious piece of causal reasoning).

Exclusive disjunctions—wherein either *p* or *q* must be true, but both cannot be true—are not technically disjunctions at all, but rather *conjunctions*.[25] Still, I mention them in this context because of their similar grammatical form, and because they are even better contexts for exposing presuppositions via embedding than inclusive disjunctions.

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[25] Exclusive disjunctions do not have the form 'p v q', but rather '(p v q) • ~(p • q)'.

Perhaps this is because, like conditionals, they suggest some kind of causal connection between two propositions. Consider the exclusive disjunctions in (17a) and (17b), again preceded by the doubt expressed in (16):

(16)   I do not know whether there are any ghosts in Hans's attic.

(17)   a. Either the ghost in his attic will be quiet tonight, or Hans will have to find a different place to study.

b. Either there is exactly one ghost in his attic and it will be quiet tonight, or Hans will have to find a different place to study.

Observe that in (17a) the causal connection suggested is so strong that we might even call this disjunction a "conditional in disguise." But in (17b) it is completely lost, leaving us with a piece of incoherent reasoning. Again, we see that the doubt expressed in (16) conflicts with (17a) but not (17b).

2.4.2   Questions

Russell's theory of descriptions was meant to apply to propositions. Logic and mathematics deal with propositions. And propositions are one of the few types of things that may be true or false.[26] Applying Russell translations to statements embedded in a question is an unorthodox extension of the theory, because questions are not translatable into logic (i.e., they have no truth-value).

But here is why Russell translations need to hold up for statements *embedded* within certain kinds of questions. We can embed any Russell-translatable proposition *p*

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[26] Propositions are also called 'statements.' I prefer this latter term because it conveys the same meaning but sounds less like logician's technical jargon. Russell vacillated between the two. In *Problems of Philosophy,* he wrote: "truth and falsehood are properties of beliefs and statements" (1912, p. 48).

within a question about its truth-value, resulting in a kind of *interrogative attitude* toward *p*. That is, we can ask 'Is it true that *p*?' And we had better be able to answer this question 'yes' just in case *p* is true, and 'no' just in case *p* is false. And if Russell translations result in an accurate rendering of the *logical content* of a sentence *p*, then *p* needs have the same truth-conditions as its Russell translation. After all, Russell's Paradox can be put in the form of a (very vexing) question[27], and in order to answer it (or show why it cannot be answered) it is crucial that Russell's translation method hold up in this embedded context.

For our purposes I shall use much simpler examples than Russell's Paradox. Consider the following case of (18), which can be Russell-translated as (19):

(18)   The ghost in Hans's attic is humming *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*.

(19)   There is exactly one ghost in Hans's attic and it is humming *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*.

The embedded version of (18) is (20), and if we embed (19) we should get (21):

(20)   Is it true that the ghost in Hans's attic is humming *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*?

(21)   Is it true that there is exactly one ghost in Hans's attic and it is humming *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*?

Now consider the framed versions (22) and (23):

(22)   I don't know if there are any ghosts in Hans's attic. But is it true that the ghost in Hans's attic is humming *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*?

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[27] 'Does the class of all classes that do not contain themselves, contain itself?'

(23)   I don't know if there are any ghosts in Hans's attic. But is it true that there

is exactly one ghost in Hans's attic and it is humming *Eine kleine*

Nachtmusik?

We see the same kind of pattern with questions as we did with previous sentence forms.

Sentence (21) seems to muddle the meaning of (20), which did not seem to ask anything

about whether there was a unique ghost or not. And pairings like (22) seem inconsistent,

because the questioner seems to be assuming there is a ghost in Hans's attic after

explicitly doubting it. The pairing in (23) seems much more natural, because doubt

expressed in the first sentence is reinforced by doubt expressed in the second.

2.4.3   Commands

As in the case with questions, applying Russell translations to statements embedded

within a command is an unorthodox extension of the theory, because commands are not

translatable into logic. But we can use a command to embed a Russell-translatable

statement p, resulting in a kind of *imperative attitude* toward p. When we command

someone to do something, we are ordering them to make some proposition p true. We are

saying: 'Make it the case that p.'[28]

Here is why Russell translations need to hold up for statements *embedded* within

commands. The question 'Has the command been executed successfully?' is equivalent

to 'Has the person executing the command made p true?' We had better be able to answer

this question 'yes' just in case he has made p true, and 'no' just in case he has *not* made p

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[28] We need not argue that *any* command can be rendered this way. It suffices that *some* of them can. Still, a
great variety of commands can be so rendered. (E.g., 'Shut up!' means 'Make it the case that you are no
longer speaking!' and 'Sit down!' means 'Make it the case that you are sitting!')

true. Again, the statement *p* needs to have the same truth-conditions as its Russell translation.

To see this more clearly, consider the command in (24), which I have rendered as an "imperative attitude" in (25):

(24)   Straighten the picture on the wall.

(25)   Make it the case that the picture on the wall is straight.

Now (25) contains a proposition (26) that we can Russell-translate into (27) and embed as in (28):

(26)   The picture on the wall is straight.

(27)   There is a unique picture on the wall and it is straight.

(28)   Make it the case that there is a unique picture on the wall and it is straight.

While (25) seems to involve finding and adjusting a single picture which the speaker is presuming exists, (28) may involve buying a picture and hanging it carefully, straightening a picture that is already hanging, or taking down scores of pictures so that only one remains (to save time, perhaps we should keep one that is already hanging level and straight?). It also leaves open the possibility that we could satisfy the command by swapping out *the picture already hanging on the wall* with another unique picture, as long as we make sure it is straight. This does not seem to be in compliance with untranslated (25). Clearly these are very different commands, based on differences in *where* we are putting our assumptions about the existence and uniqueness of the picture. As in the previous cases, pairing reveals presuppositions:

(29)   I'm not sure whether there are any pictures on the wall. But make it the
        case that the picture on the wall is straight.

(30)   I'm not sure whether there are any pictures on the wall. But make it the
        case that there is a unique picture on the wall and it is straight.

The pairing in (30) makes sense only because the *assertion* that there is a unique picture
on the wall is qualified by its embedding in a command. In (29), the presupposition
projected in the second sentence conflicts with the explicit doubt expressed in the first.

2.5   Presuppositional Commitments with Proper Names

For both Frege and Strawson, definite descriptions share a uniquely referring function
with proper names (Frege, 1892, pp. 41-42; Strawson, 1950, p. 320). If presuppositions
underlie the function of referential terms in general, we should be able to expose them in
cases involving proper names as well.[29] Here is one example, plugging a proper name
into an Elbourne-style sentence pair:

(31)   a. I'm not sure whether there is anyone named 'Conran.' But if Conran is
        allergic to shrimp, Henry will have to throw out this batch of gumbo.
        b. I'm not sure whether there is anyone named 'Conran.' But if there is a
        person named 'Conran' and he is allergic to shrimp, Henry will have to
        throw out this batch of gumbo.

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[29] Here I take no position on whether the functioning of names is Millian (strictly referential), descriptive,
causal-historical, or something else. It suffices here to show that the use of proper names does depend on
presuppositions.

The very use of a proper name like 'Conran' triggers a presupposition that it has some kind of reference, and this gives us that now-familiar feeling of conflict in the sentence pair (31a). If we try to cram that assumption into the antecedent of the conditional in (31b) (a "pseudo-Russellian" translation), it is consistent with doubt about whether anyone bears that name.[30]

This, at a minimum, must be presupposed by a speaker *using* a proper name: That it has a reference to some contextually salient or unique thing. Whenever a sentence has problems due to presuppositions of the existence or uniqueness of a thing, what the sentence suffers from is a reference failure—essentially the introduction of an undefined term—and not some kind of conjoined (and false) claim. Whatever presuppositions are, one of their functions appears to be establishing the objects of reference (or, in the case of definite descriptions, establishing the materials from which they may be constructed).

2.6   Russell Translation and Vanishing Commitments

Let us now examine how Russell translations affect the arguments in which they are used, and how they affect the speaker's commitments in particular. One of the things Russell wanted to do was to hold the speaker accountable for ontological commitments incurred by definite descriptions such as 'the present king of France'. Russell's system does this well in the case of statements such as 'The present king of France is bald', but as I show below, when these same statements are embedded in a non-committed context

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[30] Russell would certainly not have advocated the translation in (32b). He treated most proper names as disguised descriptions. Sometimes these are simply descriptions built on the name itself. Such is the case when he interprets 'Scott is Sir Walter' as "'The person named 'Scott' is the person named 'Sir Walter'"' (1919, p. 216). In another example, he advised substituting 'the sun god' for the proper name 'Apollo' in order to show that the name is non-denoting (1905, p. 491). For our purposes, either strategy would yield similar results to my "pseudo-Russellian" translation.

within another statement, Russell actually *lets the speaker off the hook*. This is because under embeddings, Russell-translations tend to make the speaker's commitments about existence disappear. But a presuppositional analysis holds a speaker to his existential commitments, because it ties them to the *use* of definite descriptions. As a result, it helps us maintain a more strict ontology.

From here on, we focus on *declarative* sentences and leave aside questions and commands. The latter two types of sentences have served their purpose in my argument by illustrating that presuppositions function consistently across a range of different types of sentences, and that presuppositional analyses are better equipped to explain this behavior than Russell translations across a wide range of non-committed embedding contexts. But from the standpoint of logic, questions and commands are untranslatable because they do not assert anything, and thus have no truth-value or truth-conditions. For simplicity, I focus on examples involving atomic statements[31] and conditionals.

The pattern we have established through examining a wide range of these sentence pairs is that the presuppositions of existence and uniqueness triggered by the use of definite descriptions sometimes project from embedded contexts like non-doxastic propositional attitudes, antecedents of conditionals, disjunctions, questions, and commands. If a presupposition projects from an embedding, it retains its full assertive force and is not qualified or negated by its embedded context. Thus, in Elbourne-style sentence pairings, we perceive a conflict between the existence-doubting first sentence

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[31] *Atomic statements* do not contain other statements as components.

and presuppositions projected from the *untranslated* second sentence. But we do not perceive this conflict if we proceed instead to the *Russell-translated* second sentence.

Let me be clear about why a Russellian cannot see conflicts of the type illustrated in our Elbourne-style sentence pairings:

a. He has replaced the definite description that is projecting the existence presupposition with a Russell translation.

b. He believes the Russell translation sufficiently accounts for this presupposition, which he has now placed in the statement itself, as a conjoined assertion.

c. The truth of this embedded statement is qualified (e.g., it is preceded by "if"), such that it *need not be true* for the *embedding* statement[32] to be true (again, '*p*' need not be true for 'If *p* then *q*' to be true).

d. Because it is part of the embedded statement, the existence claim itself is now qualified in the same manner—*it need not be true, and the speaker is not committed to its truth*.

e. Because the existence claim is so qualified by embedding, it does not produce a conflict if a statement doubting (or outright denying) the existence claim is found elsewhere in the argument (as in the existence-doubting first sentence of our pairs).

Let us examine three cases to illustrate the difference between the Russellian and presuppositional analyses of sentences containing definite descriptions in the context of an argument. The first will be the case of an atomic statement featuring a "bad" (non-

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[32] *Or* the embedding sentence is a non-statement (e.g., a question or command), in which case there is no truth-value to which the speaker may commit.

denoting) definite description. The second will involve the same sentence embedded in the antecedent of a conditional. The third will examine a sentence containing a "good" definite description, also embedded in the antecedent of a conditional.

Case 1

For reference, let us examine a paradigm case for Russell-translations, the kind of case it was *designed* to handle:

(32)   The present king of France is bald.

(33)   There exists a unique present king of France and he is bald.

In this case, a Russellian can safely call (32) false, because Russell-translated (33) implies (34) below[33]:

(34)   There exists a present king of France.

More precisely, he can hold the speaker of (32) accountable for the existence commitment in (34), because the speaker is straightforwardly committed to (32) and all its implications. Because (34) is false, (32) must also be false. And the speaker's argument suffers in proportion to its dependence on (32).

A Strawsonian can also hold the speaker of (32) accountable for (34), because (34) is a *presupposition* triggered by 'the present king of France' in (32). His interpretation will be slightly different from the Russellian one. He regards the truth of (34) as a condition for (32) *being* a usable statement in the first place, so because (34) is false, (32) is unusable. And the speaker's argument is deprived of using (32), yielding in practical terms the same consequences as the Russellian translation.

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[33] It actually takes three deductions to go from (33) to (34) in predicate calculus. We must first employ the rule *Existential Instantiation,* then *Simplification* and finally *Existential Generalization.*

Case 2

Now let us embed our sentence from Case 1 in the antecedent of a conditional (35) and produce its Russell-translation in (36). (I rewrite (34) here for reference.)

(34)   (*Presupposition*) There exists a present king of France.

(35)   If the present king of France is bald, Bob wins a 50 dollar bet.

(36)   If there exists a unique present king of France and he is bald, Bob wins a 50 dollar bet.

A Russellian translates (35) as (36), similar to what he does in Case 1. But here the speaker is explicitly uncommitted to the antecedent *as an independent claim*. His attitude is "*If* there exists such-and-such…" And the Russellian is unable to isolate the antecedent of (36) as an independent claim, because in sentential and predicate logic there is no way to proceed from (36) to (33) without additional premises. ('If *p* then *q*' does *not* imply '*p*'.) So if the speaker *is* committed to the existence claim in (34), a Russellian has no way of showing it.

A Strawsonian, however, can proceed as he did in Case 1. He can hold the speaker accountable for the existence commitment expressed in (34), because 'the present king of France' in the antecedent of (35) still triggers (34) as a presupposition even when the sentence in which it occurs is so embedded. So the speaker is stuck with his false presupposition (34), and the statement (36) is unusable in the argument, because the truth of (34) is required for its antecedent to be usable.

Under the Russellian treatment, the speaker is *not* held accountable for his commitment to a non-existent French king, because Russell-translated (36) does not

generate the false presupposition (34). Nor does his argument suffer because of his false assumption. The conditional (36) is still usable, and it must be *true* because the Russell-translated antecedent is false.[34] In addition, because (34) is not a *premise* under the Russellian analysis, it has no logical consequences for the speaker's argument. For instance, if the speaker asserts its negation (37)[35], there will be no contradiction with (34) (which is not a premise) or with the Russell-translated statement (36):

(34)   (*Unrecognized Presupposition*) There exists a present king of France.

(36)   If there exists a unique present king of France and he is bald, Bob wins a 50 dollar bet.

(37)   It is false that there exists a present king of France.

A Strawsonian, by recognizing that (34) is presupposed, can see this contradiction for what it is. The contradiction is just one example. We can generate any number of statements that would be affected by (34), the premise missing from the Russellian analysis of (35).

Case 3

In discussions of Russell's theory of descriptions (this one is no exception), there is heavy focus on sentences containing non-denoting descriptions. I want to examine a case of how Russell-translations impact sentences containing *successfully denoting* definite

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[34] *Any* conditional with a false antecedent is true. Russell is not responsible for this quirk of sentential and predicate logic.

[35] In fact, we must assert (37) in order to show that the antecedent of (36) is false. This is to say that if the *speaker* asserts (37), he is contradicting himself, and a Russellian will not see it.

descriptions. Such a sentence is here embedded in the antecedent of a conditional in (38), and the Russell-translated version is provided in (39):

(38)   If the second person to walk on the Moon is from New Jersey, then anyone from New Jersey can be proud.

(39)   If there exists a unique second person to walk on the Moon and this person is from New Jersey, then anyone from New Jersey can be proud.

A Russellian will shoehorn the speaker's assumption about the existence of our second Moon-walker into the antecedent, removing his commitment to its truth. But a Strawsonian will see (40), a presupposition projected from (38) as an independent, unqualified assumption:

(40)   (*Presupposition*) There exists a second person to walk on the Moon.

It is hard to see how a Russell translation *hurts* the speaker's argument, except that it does not give him credit for his *true* assumption here.[36] And it makes him sound oddly non-committal about an issue that, in the untranslated (38), he seems to take for granted.

But as in Case 2, the Russellian version's missing premise (40) has logical consequences. The speaker could contradict his own presupposition by uttering (41):

(41)   It is false that there exists a second person to walk on the Moon.

And again, a Russellian, believing (39) has captured the whole situation, would not detect it. Or the speaker might go on to assert the following conditional in his argument:

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[36] At the time of my writing this paper, Buzz Aldrin, the second person to walk on the Moon, is still alive. And he is from New Jersey.

(42) If there exists a second person to walk on the Moon, then it is false that humans have never travelled to the Moon.

The speaker of (38) would certainly seem to be committed to the consequent of (42), expressed here as (43):

(43) It is false that humans have never travelled to the Moon.

But to a Russellian, premise (40), the antecedent of (42), is not available as a premise. So he cannot make the deduction. And thus some of the logic of the speaker's argument would be invisible to a Russellian.

2.7 A Potential Russellian Objection Considered

In light of the shortcomings of Russell's theory that I have just examined, a Russellian could argue that there is no reason a sentence using a definite description could not both assert *and* presuppose existence. This would preserve a bivalent logic by partitioning sentences with non-denoting descriptions into the "false" category, but it would still allow us to see the presuppositional commitments that were a blind spot for Russellian analysis in Cases 2 and 3. Let us examine the effects of such a revised Russellian theory on Case 2.

In Case 2, it would mean (35) is still translated as in (36), but it still generates the presupposition (34):

(34) (*Presupposition*) There exists a present king of France.

(35) If the present king of France is bald, Bob wins a 50 dollar bet.

(36)   If there exists a unique present king of France and he is bald, Bob wins a
50 dollar bet.

But there are several problems with this argument.

As Rothschild noted, adding presuppositions to a Russell translation is redundant
(2007, p. 88). In Case 1, this redundancy is especially apparent. Why place an existence
assumption in two different places? If the Russell translation is doing its job adequately
inside the statement, we should not need it in another place. If all the Russell translation
is allowing us to do is judge the offending statement "false," perhaps it would suit us
better to stick with the Frege-Strawson version and simply call sentences with non-
denoting descriptions "false" instead of unusable.

It also fails to explain why the presuppositions are triggered in the first place
(Rothschild, 2007, p. 88). Any attempted explanation is compounded by the oddity of
presuppositions existing when their trigger in the sentence (the definite description itself)
has been translated away.

Adding presuppositions to the Russellian analysis also does nothing to address the
mistranslation issues and bits of very odd reasoning that I have noted in the examples
above, all resulting from Russell's translation method.

This dual solution leads to a tension between the presuppositions (which are
independent premises, and thus fully committed contexts) and the doubt cast on the
claims within any Russell-translation in an embedded context. If we read (34) followed
by (36), why is there suddenly doubt about the present king of France in (36)? This is
almost a mirror image of the tension we observed in Elbourne-style sentence pairs. Why

should there be any tension between the content of the *asserted* and the *presupposed* version?

Most importantly, in embedded contexts like (36), the extra presuppositions seem to cancel out any doubt cast upon the assumptions of existence and uniqueness that the Russellian puts inside the sentence. Observe what happens if we follow (36) with presupposition (34a) (a combined existence and uniqueness presupposition)[37]:

> (36)   If there exists a unique present king of France and he is bald, Bob wins a
>
>   50 dollar bet.

> (34)   a. (*Presupposition*) There exists a unique present king of France.

It becomes clear that the speaker is *sure* about the presupposed matter, and the only question in (36) is *really* about the French king's baldness. Striking out the uncertain portions of (36) that were cancelled by (34a), we are left with this version (36a):

> (36)   If ~~there exists a unique present king of France and he~~ is bald, Bob wins a
>
>   50 dollar bet.

> (36)   a. If (it) is bald, Bob wins a 50 dollar bet.

If *it* is bald, Bob wins a 50 dollar bet? The sentence (36a) is incomplete, for in the process of moving to the Russell translation, we lost the subject term. The definite description 'the present king of France' served the purpose of defining 'it' in the original sentence. Restoring the subject term, we return to the original (35), which is the version Frege-Strawson would have kept in the first place, recognizing that *the use of the definite*

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[37] See p. 27n for more on exposing uniqueness presuppositions. Existence and uniqueness can be exposed as independent assumptions and can be conjoined at a later point in the argument. Here I conjoin the two assumptions for the purpose of isolating the grammatical predicate (i.e., 'is bald').

description triggers presuppositions of existence and uniqueness that function as

independent premises.

(35)   If (the present king of France) is bald, Bob wins a 50 dollar bet.

This revised dual-solution of the Russellian actually vindicates the Frege-Strawson position by arriving at the same conclusion: Statements are not *claims* about the existence or uniqueness of the things identified by the subject terms used (in this case definite descriptions), but rather they are *predications* of those things—the existence and uniqueness of which is taken for granted. If existence and uniqueness are presupposed and function as independent premises, we might as well just leave the referential subject term as it is, because we gain nothing by swapping it out for a Russell-translation.

Conclusion

I have argued in favor of a presuppositional analysis of definite descriptions using a series of embedded sentences with definite descriptions as fodder for analysis. If I have expanded and deepend the analyses of Heim and Elbourne, I consider my effort a success. But I hope I have also convinced the reader of the importance of locating our assumptions about existence and uniqueness in the correct place, and that a presuppositional analysis does this better than the standard Russellian one. A presuppositional analysis also explains the behavior of definite descriptions in a great variety of contexts, where the Russellian analysis only explains the case of non-embedded propositions. I have also endeavored to show that the Russellian analysis, by tucking presuppositional information into the triggering sentence, not only produces strange readings of embedded sentences, but does not properly account for the commitments of using definite descriptions.

Russell's desire to locate existence and uniqueness claims within the sentence itself may have been the result of his conviction that the single statement or proposition was the proper level of analysis. As we grow to accept something more compatible with a Quinian semantic holism, we are apt to see more clearly the interconnectivity of all sentences. Presupposition projection is just one aspect of this interwoven quality of language that is beginning to be understood in greater detail.

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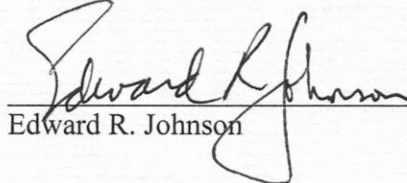
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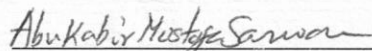
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