Incomplete Definite Descriptions, Demonstrative Completion and Redundancy

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March 20, 2002

Abstract

"Incomplete" definite descriptions (i.e. descriptions that violate the uniqueness constraint) have been offered various accounts in semantics. Among them, the so-called ellipsis account, which analyzes "the F" as elliptical for "the F which is *that* F". I begin by arguing that the objections raised against this account have not been conclusive, and go on to supply a new argument against it, which consists in showing such demonstrative completions to be semantically redundant.

1 The Problem

A friend, whose dog I was playing with, said to me once:

(1)   The dog likes you.

   or perhaps:

(2)   That dog likes you,

   I don't quite remember. To know which was exactly the sentence he used does not seem to matter much. In contrast with layman's intuitions, most semantic theories see a huge difference between the way in which definite descriptions, like "the dog", and complex demonstratives, like "that dog" contribute to the truth conditions. There is wide agreement that the dog itself, Fido, is what "that dog" contributes to the truth conditions of (2) so that (2) is true iff Fido likes me (at the time of the utterance.[1] But when it comes to definite descriptions, semanticists are at pains to agree on how "the dog" contributes to the truth conditions of (1). If, following

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[1] This view of demonstratives is common to David Kaplan's account in (Kalpan, 1989) and the theory of Richard Larson and Gabriel Segal in (Larson and Segal, 1990).

Bertrand Russell,[2] "the such-and-such is so-and-so" is true iff exactly one thing is such-and-such, and it is also so-and-so, then (1) is bound to be false, it seems, since there are plenty of dogs in the universe.

"Incomplete" definite descriptions, which violate Russell's uniqueness condition, seem to pose a problem only to the accounts that do *not* view definite descriptions as referential expressions.[3] Why not say, then, that definite descriptions can at least be referentially *used*, so that (1) and (2) end up receiving the same truth conditions?[4] Yet another option is to say that (1) literally says something false, but conveys something true, namely, that Fido likes me.[5] Some might be tempted to say that the domain of discourse relevant to interpreting (1) contains only one dog, Fido, so that the uniqueness condition becomes fulfilled after all. The portion of the universe over which the quantifier ranges would be then specified by the context.[6] At last, some might suggest that not the whole sentence is phonetically realized in (1). (1) would then simply serve as a shorthand for something more complex, like:

(3)   The dog that you are playing with right now likes you.

(1) might as well be a shorthand for (2). Then all one needs to do is recover a completion that will prevent the failure of the uniqueness condition.[7]

In the last century, many accounts of incomplete definite descriptions have seen light, but none has received a unanimous support, and, more importantly, none has been refuted either, *pace* claims to the contrary. In this paper, I focus on the so-called *ellipsis* approach. I begin by arguing that the arguments offered against it did not prove conclusive. I provide two replies to the argument from *indeterminacy*, which objects to the ellipsis approach that it fails to recover a determinate completion. One reply is that the recovery devices may themselves depend upon the context in a way that allows them to yield a determinate completion. The other reply is that one can associate to every incomplete description a *canonical* completion, namely, a demonstrative completion that recovers "that" over "the". I then argue that the argument from knowledge, which points that one may be ignorant of demonstratives while competent at using incomplete definite

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[2]See (Russell, 1905). Russell's proposal has been incorporated in the framework of generalized quantifiers, as in (Neale, 1990) or (Larson and Segal, 1990).

[3]For a famous defense of a Referential account of definite descriptions see (Strawson, 1950).

[4]See (Donnellan, 1966).

[5]See (Kripke, 1977), and (Bach, 1994).

[6]The suggestion goes back to (Barwise and Cooper, 1981). Jason Stanley and Zoltán Szabó contend that this is the only sound view of incomplete descriptions. See (Stanley and Szabó, 2000).

[7]See (Neale, 2000).

descriptions, does not go through for the simple fact that, in general, one does not have to know the phonetic realization of some particular expression in order to make an ellipsis on that expression.

Even though the ellipsis account of incomplete descriptions resists both arguments, it still appears to be deeply mistaken. The reason, I argue, is that demonstrative completions over definite descriptions, likely to be forced upon the account by the argument from indeterminacy, are actually redundant. Incomplete definite descriptions are not always meant to refer to particular objects. That is descriptions used attributively and anaphorically may help us to get to the redundancy result. It is clear that such incomplete descriptions may be completed into complex demonstratives *salva congruitate*. The question is how demonstratives used attributively or anaphorically are to be accounted for. If such demonstratives are seen as definite descriptions in disguise, the ellipsis account will be circular and lack a solution to the problem that it purports to solve. If, on the other hand, they are still seen as genuine referential expressions, the account will lack motivations for *not* considering definite descriptions as referential expressions from the outset.[8]

2 The Argument from Indeterminacy

In its typical instances, bare ellipsis consists in leaving out some expression recoverable from the discourse, as in:

(4)   Bill wants pie for dessert and Al pudding.

(5)   Bill has one child and Al four.

Thus the speaker of (4) fails to pronounce the whole sentence "Al wants pudding for dessert", while the speaker of (5) omits "has" and "children", recoverable from the previously used "child".[9]

Some cases of incomplete descriptions fit nicely into this picture. Consider:

(6)   I saw a neighbor of mine kissing a woman on the staircase. The
       woman was his wife.

It could be that the description "the woman" is a shorthand for e.g. "the woman that I saw being kissed by a neighbor of mine on the staircase", which

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[8] It is noteworthy that from the standpoint of etymology, the ties between demonstratives and the definite article are straightforward. The idea that "the" is a reduced form of "that" may be found e.g. in (Jespersen, 1924).

[9] (4) is an example from Kent Bach, who wrote: "Utterances are elliptical, strictly speaking, only if the suppressed material is recoverable (..) by grammatical means alone". (Bach, 1994, p. 131)

is recoverable from the discourse alone. However, not many incomplete descriptions are amenable to this sort of analysis. Take Keith Donnellan's well-known example: having come upon Smith's cruelly mutilated body, the inspector, without suspecting anyone in particular, says:

(7)   The murderer must be insane.

There is nothing in the discourse itself to complete the description. To keep viewing "the murderer" as a shorthand for another description respectful of the uniqueness constraint, the recovery of the elided material had better depend not only upon the linguistic context, but upon the context in its most general sense. Let us call *narrow* the approach that constrains the recovery of the elided material down to linguistic inputs only, and *broad* the approach that allow any kind of contextual input. Both philosophers and linguists seem to agree that no narrow approach can be worked out – as (7) already suggests – and that no broad approach can be worked out either, since there seems to be no algorithm to tell us how to recover the elided material. Howard Wettstein wrote: "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 (..) Since these more complete descriptions are not synonymous, it follows that each time we replace (..) 'the table' with a different one of these 'Russellian' descriptions, it would seem that we obtain an expression for a different proposition".[10]

Some have thought, erroneously, that Wettstein's worry would not arise if "non- descriptive" completions were possible: completions with referential expressions which, albeit different, would pick out the same referent.[11] But as pointed out by Marga Reimer, "even if completions of incomplete descriptions are stipulated to be non-descriptive, the problem of adjudicating between non-equivalent, co-denoting descriptions remains".[12]

So let me put the argument from indeterminacy as follows: *The ellipsis approach to incomplete descriptions fails because it does not formulate any algorithm that may tell us how to recover a determinate completion over an incomplete description.*

To rule out this argument, it will not do just to have non-descriptive completions, whose values depend on the context of utterance. The "algorithm" that yields those completions should also be able to depend on the context. Now, Wettstein has argued convincingly enough that there was no obvious algorithm leading from an incomplete description to its completion, and that even the speaker may be unable to point to some determinate completion. But this does not show yet that there are utterances of incomplete

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[10](Wettstein, 1981, p. 246)

[11]e.g. Stephen Neale in (Neale, 1990)

[12](Reimer, 1992, p. 353); François Recanati similarly noted: "Even if we accept that the expressed content is singular, still it is totally indeterminate which particular sentence expressing that content the uttered sentence is elliptical for". (Recanati, 1996, p. 449 fn.)

descriptions which lack a determinate completion. The point may be made clear by looking at the behavior of demonstratives. The linguistic meaning of a demonstrative such as "that" does not correspond to any expression *à la* "what I am pointing to" or "what I have in mind". In other words, no unique expression encodes an algorithm that leads from a demonstrative to its referent. But this does not mean that there are utterances of "that" without a determinate referent. The meaning of "that" might exploit all the cues that the context makes available, take those cues as inputs, and give us the referent of "that" as an output. This is perfectly compatible with the fact that *we* did not manage to come up with a suitably formulated algorithm. Similarly, one may suggest that the meaning of "the" exploits any contextual cue available so as to single out a completion.[13]

There is a reply, then, to the argument from indeterminacy. True, it 'passes the buck' to the semantics of "the", but this simply shows that there is no special link between indeterminacy and ellipsis. Besides, it takes little to realize that other accounts of incomplete descriptions are not any better off in this regard. Indeterminacy is a very general phenomenon, and Stanley and Szabó were wrong to think that indeterminacy obliged the ellipsis approach to place "intolerable burdens on any possible solution" to the semantics of "the". They wrote: "context has to provide a specific predicate (..) And it is exceedingly hard to see what feature of context could [select the predicate F among other candidates]".[14] At the same time, they did not see the same "intolerable burden" placed on the contextual restriction of the domain of discourse. But take (7). What feature of context could restrict the domain down to a set that contains no other murderers than whoever happens to have murdered Smith? Why should some person rather than another belong there? The only way to restrict the domain appropriately would be, it seems, by means of some clause like "the murderer of the person whose mutilated body we are looking at". And it makes little difference whether this clause helps to restrict the domain of discourse, or itself constitutes what is recovered over some other expression.

3   The Argument from Knowledge

There is another possible reply to the argument from indeterminacy, which moreover makes a good case for the narrow ellipsis approach to incomplete descriptions. The reply consists in showing that for every incomplete description it is possible to come up with a determinate, canonical completion.

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[13]It is somewhat ironical that Wettstein, who supports this view for demonstratives in (Wettstein, 1984), should thus provide a possible reply to his own argument against the ellipsis account of incomplete descriptions.

[14](Wettstein, 1984, p. 238). The issue of indeterminacy is also known as the issue of underdetermination. For discussion, see (Recanati, 1993, p. 235 ff.).

Thus every definite description "the F" that violates the uniqueness constraint while empirically yielding true utterances may be seen as elliptical for "the F which is *that* F", or simply for "*that* F". The user of an incomplete description may be then seen as having failed to pronounce /at/ after /th/. He has used a definite article while intending to use a demonstrative.

First of all, it should be shown that canonical completion works. That is obvious for those cases in which there is something contextually salient that the description singles out, in the way in which "the dog" singles out Fido in (1). The cases that are worrisome are rather of the same ilk as (6), in which the description is anaphoric, or as (7), in which it is attributive. But, as it turns out, complex demonstratives also allow for anaphoric as well as for attributive uses.[15] One can utter "*that* such-and- such is so-and-so", just as one can utter "*the* such-and-such is so-and-so", in order to attribute the property of being so-and-so to *whatever* is such-and-such, even when there is nothing *of* which the speaker wishes to say that *it* is such-and-such. Thus, instead of (7), the inspector might have said as well:

(8)   That murdered must be insane.

If we turn to definite descriptions used anaphorically, we also see that they can always be replaced, in a more or less felicitous manner, by complex demonstratives. Thus, instead of (6), I might have said as well:

(9)   I saw a neighbor of mine kissing a woman on the staircase. That woman was his wife.

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that substituting "that" for "the" generally works. The output of the substitution may be less felicitous than the input, but there shall be no difference in the truth conditions. Will there be anything wrong, then, with the narrow ellipsis approach? Stanley and Szabó thought they had a knockdown argument against it, which I shall call the argument from *knowledge*. They wrote: "Suppose that Max is not a fully competent speaker of English. (..) The use of demonstrative pronouns is not discussed until unit 7 and Max is not there yet. (..) Since Max does not know the word 'that', he cannot identify the sentence uttered by the speaker of (1) which contains that word as an unarticulated constituent".[16] As Max, competent in the use of the definite article, has no difficulties to understand (1), Stanley and Szabó were led to conclude that (1) cannot be elliptical for (2).

If this argument were to be taken seriously, it would have been a knockdown argument against ellipsis in general. Thus, suppose that Max does

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[15]In (King, 1999), Jeffrey King uses precisely this sort of cases to motivate an account of complex demonstratives in terms of restricted quantifiers.

[16](King, 1999, p. 238); "unarticulated" reads as "elided". I have taken the liberty of making necessary changes so that the quote fits the examples that I have been using here.

not know what the plural of "child" is, but knows that it is irregular. As he does not want to reveal his ignorance, he says "Bill has one child and Al four", as in (5). Shall we say then that his utterance cannot be elliptical for "Bill has one child and Al has four *children*"? No. Ignorance of the phonetic realization of some grammatical form of an expression is not enough to prevent us from making utterances elliptical on that expression, still less from understanding them.[17]

4 The Argument from Redundancy

Let me take stock. The narrow ellipsis approach, which over every incomplete description recovers a canonical, demonstrative completion, meets the argument from indeterminacy in that it does provide a determinate completion, whereas the argument from knowledge has simply proved flawed. Now, the question was how to ascribe correct truth conditions to an utterance that involves a definite description that does not single out a unique entity. If the ellipsis approach is to provide a solution, it must be able to ascribe correct truth conditions to utterances that involve complex demonstratives in lieu of incomplete definite descriptions. The view on which "that" is a referential expression whose truth-conditional contribution consists of its referent has no problem with those cases in which there is some contextually salient referent, as in Fido's case. Rather, the question is how that view deals with other cases, in which demonstratives are used attributively or anaphorically. If demonstratives lose their referential character in those cases, and turn out to be definite descriptions in disguise, then the ellipsis approach clearly lacks a clue to the problem of incomplete descriptions. Conversely, if demonstratives keep referential even when they are used attributively or anaphorically, then it must be possible to provide definite descriptions themselves with an account that sees them as referential expressions. In either case, the recovery of the demonstrative over the definite article must prove unattractive, since the material recovered turns out to be redundant. Albeit possible, the ellipsis approach is far from attractive, for either it lacks a solution to the problem that it purports to solve, or it lacks motivations for not analyzing definite descriptions as referential expressions, while being able to do so.[18]

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[17]Had Max have no *concept* of demonstratives, perhaps he would have given us reasons to be suspicious toward the ellipsis approach. But it is far from clear that anyone without any idea of how demonstratives work could ever grasp what (1) says. And it is not much more clear that the mastery of "that" requires anything more than does the mastery of "the".

[18]The cases that pose problems for referential accounts of definite descriptions – cases which had originally motivated Russell's view – are precisely the cases of descriptions attributively used and the cases of anaphora. If there is a referential account of demonstratives that covers their anaphoric and attributive uses, that same account should apply to definite descriptions. The choice, then, to reserve the referential account for demonstratives and to subject definite descriptions to a non-referential one can only be arbitrary

In the remainder of the paper, let me try to see whether there is a referential account of demonstratives that covers their anaphoric and attributive uses. (Keep in mind, though, that the answer does not affect the argument itself.)

The cases of anaphora that we have seen are not, so to say, difficult enough, since there is something singled out by the antecedent. Consider this harder case instead:

(10) Whenever you see a neighbor of yours kissing a woman on the staircase, the woman (/ that woman) may easily happen to be his wife.

The quantifier "whenever", which, for our purposes, may be taken to range over situations, makes it clear that there is not a single woman relevant to the truth of (10). How can "that woman" then occur as a referential expression in (10)? It seems that if "that woman" were a genuine demonstrative, there would have to be some particular woman whom it would stand for.

Notwithstanding appearances, there appears to be a way of maintaining a referential approach to complex demonstratives, even when they are anaphoric on non-referential expressions.[19]

We can roughly say that (10) is true iff C is true for every pair of referential terms substituted for (x) and (y) respectively, where C is the conditional: 'when you see (x) kissing (y) in the staircase and (x) is a neighbor of yours and (y) is a woman, (y) may easily happen to be (x)'s wife'. The general idea is that every situation involving a neighbor of yours and some woman in which you can truly say: "I see *him*, a neighbor of mine, kissing *that woman* on the staircase", is also a situation in which you can truly say: "*that woman* may well happen to be *his* wife". In other words, we no longer take quantifiers to range properly over individuals, but only over situations.[20]

There is one step left from a referential account of demonstratives anaphorically used to a referential account of demonstratives attributively used, hence of definite descriptions. Recall the situation that was under consideration. Seeing Smith's body cruelly mutilated, the inspector says:

and unmotivated.

[19] In certain respects, the account is similar to Gareth Evans' account of unbound anaphoric pronouns (also called E-type): "If we adopt a Fregean account of satisfaction, we have only to give an account of the pronoun-antecedent construction as it occurs in singular sentences – no further explanation need be given of pronouns with quantifier antecedents. (..) A natural explanation of the role of pronouns with singular antecedents is in terms of co-reference – the pronoun refers to whatever the antecedent refers to". (Evans, 1985, p. 227); See also (Evans, 1977).

[20] There are other frameworks favorable to the idea. E.g. one can make quantifiers range over events, or over (possible) contexts. It goes without saying that within the boundaries of the present paper I can at best *hint* at a referential account of unbound anaphora.

(11) That murderer must be insane.

How can "that" occur as a genuine demonstrative in (11)? – there is nobody salient in the context that the inspector was talking about, nobody he meant to speak of otherwise than as of *whoever* happened to be the murderer. And if "that murderer" is not a demonstrative, but a definite description in disguise, then it is plainly circular to suggest that "the murder" used under the same circumstances should be elliptical for "that murderer".

Once again, however, it seems possible to continue treating "that murderer" as a referential expression. All we need to do is make our quantifiers range not over individuals, but over something else – situations, events, contexts, possible substitution instances, and so on. On Russell's view, (11) is true iff there is one and only one individual who is a murderer, and who, moreover, must be insane. Swaying the range of our quantifiers from individuals to situations, we would say that (11) is true iff there is one and only one situation in which one would speak truly if one said: "That murder must be insane", using "that" in reference to someone demonstrated in that situation. Such an account would clearly preserve the referential character of "that murderer". So the idea is that the demonstrative always acts as a referential expression, i.e. as an expression that contributes its referent to the truth conditions. Yet, in order to fix the referent, one must have settled on some particular situation. Most often, the situation settled on is the current one, that is, the situation in which the utterance is taking place. But that need not be the case. One may also settle on other situations, or even not settle on any particular situation at all. Thus one may simply state the existence of a situation, so that the situation relevant to fixing the reference of "that" would merely be a hypothetical situation – which is what probably happens in (11).

To be sure, the proposal that I have just canvassed does not amount to providing a solution to attributive uses of expressions normally seen as referential.[21] But what it does show is that the possibility of using an expression attributively is compatible with the possibility of giving that expression a referential account.[22] The referential account that can be given for "that", including its anaphoric and attributive uses, is likely to extend into a referential account of the definite article itself. As a consequence, an account of definite descriptions in terms of quantifiers that posits a demonstrative completion when it comes to incomplete descriptions, would simply prove unmotivated – or *dis*motivated, as might be a more proper way of putting it

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[21]Both complex demonstratives and pronouns appear to have attributive uses. Indeed, "that murderer" may be successfully replaced by "he" in (11). Another well-known example is that of a person who, spotting gigantic footprints, says: "*He* must be a giant".

[22]In this way, the referential account of "the", built out from the referential account of "that" attributively used, will not blur the epistemological distinction between two manners of individuating things – namely, by direct reference vs. by description –, brought to light by Russell in (Russell, 1910).

– given that the initial motivations for a non-referential account of definite descriptions are likely to vanish in the presence of a referential account of demonstratives that behave in the same way as definite descriptions do.

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