

A Uniform Analysis of Incomplete and Referential Definite Descriptions

Dolf Rami & Wilfried Keller

University of Göttingen

Department of Philosophy

drami@gwdg.de / Wilfried.Keller@CreativeHQ.de

A Neo-Russellian analysis of definite descriptions typically holds the following two main theses:

- (R1) The definite article 'the' is a specific generalized quantifier and not a singular term forming operator and, hence, of the same semantic kind as other generalized quantifiers like 'a' 'all' and 'some'.
- (R2) A sentence of the form 'The F is G' is true iff there is exactly one F that is G; and false iff that is not the case.

The two main alternative theses of the Neo-Fregean competitor are:

- (F1) Definite descriptions are genuine singular terms whose formal semantic representations are headed by the description operator 'ix' and, hence, they are of the same semantic kind as proper names or certain indexicals.
- (F2) A sentence of the form 'The F is G' is true iff the unique F is G; and false iff the unique F is not G. Such a sentence is neither true nor false if there is no unique F.

There are a couple of standard objections or challenges to both analyses of definite descriptions in the relevant literature, cf. Hawthorne and Manley (2012, Chap 5); Ludlow (2012). Probably, the two most important challenges that both views share come from so-called *incomplete* and *referential* uses of definite descriptions, cf. Strawson (1950); Donnellan (1966). An example that can be used to illustrate the first problem is the following: (1) *The cat is leaving the room.*

We can use this sentence to make a *true* statement about a particular cat leaving a particular room. But we cannot account for this intuitively plausible use of (1) on the basis the truth-conditions provided by (R2) or (F2).

The second mentioned problem can also be illustrated by means of an example: (2) *The murderer of Smith is insane.*

We can use a sentence like (2) to refer to a person of which we erroneously think that this person is the murderer of Smith and make a true statement about this person; for example, if we are following a trail about the murder of Smith, the main accused is an insane person and everyone in the audience erroneously believes that the main accused is the murderer, someone may use (2) to make a true statement. We again cannot account for this intuitively plausible use of (2) on the basis of the truth-conditions provided by (R2) or (F2).

In this paper, we will defend a new uniform solution to both problems that is based on the following three main theses:

- (T1) So-called incomplete and referential uses of proper names are not two distinct phenomena, but two different variations of one general phenomenon; namely, the phenomenon of *implicit content enrichment*. Both example sentences can be used to express enriched contents relative to a context of use that are generated by explicit linguistic material and implicit material provided by the context of use.
- (T2) It is possible to give a uniform semantic or pragmatic analysis of implicit content enrichment that can be incorporated into either a Neo-Russellian or a Neo-Fregean semantic framework.
- (T3) There are reasons that favor a semantic analysis over a pragmatic analysis of implicit content enrichment.

Let me briefly outline the view that we aim to defend in this paper. There are examples where both mentioned phenomena exemplified by (1) and (2) are combined. I can use the following sentence in the mentioned trial scenario to make a true statement about the main accused: (3) *The murderer is insane*. The content that is expressed by (3) contains explicit and implicit material. The very same content could be *explicitly* expressed relative to the given situation by a sentence like the following:

(3*) *The murderer [of Smith] [in my view] is insane*.

(The square brackets mark the implicit contributions to content that enrich the explicit content of (3).) A semantic approach to enriched content postulates hidden unpronounced variables at the level of syntactic/logical form of a sentence like (3) that are subject to contextual assignments. According to the version of such an approach that we prefer, the predicate 'x is a murderer' has different hidden variable relativization-parameters. In one respect, it can be relativized to a circumstances-of-evaluation parameter. It might be relativized to the actual world (intuitively, the facts) or to the present belief-worlds of the speaker (intuitively, the present beliefs of the speaker). Attributive uses are relativized to the facts, while so-called referential uses are relativized to the beliefs, presuppositions or pretenses of a speaker relative to the context of use. The second relativization concerns modifications of predicates like 'x is a murderer' by means of prepositions like 'of'. For this purpose, there must be at least two different variable parameters present at the level of logical form. A variable parameter that allows us to assign different modifying relations and a parameter that allows us to assign different implicit relations relative to a context of use; such that we can distinguish 'murderer of Jones' from 'murderer of my family' and 'book under my desk' from 'book on my desk'.

Such a semantic approach claims that the process of enrichment of (3) that makes (3) equivalent in content with (3*) is a process of contextual variable assignment. Alternative proposals have been made to capture the enrichment from (3) to (3*). Some have claimed that this mechanism operates solely on the non-linguistic, conceptual level of content, cf. Sperber and Wilson (1986, 189). Others have

claimed that (3) is elliptical and an example of loose talk. Hence, the move from (3) to (3*) is a process of ellipsis resolution, cf. Neale (2004, 121). We will provide arguments against these two alternative analyses and in favor of our proposed semantic approach.