

# *Definite Descriptions Again: Singular Reference, Quantification and Truth-Evaluation*

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**Abstract:** The author defends a combination of Strawson's account of definite descriptions as devices of singular reference *par excellence* with the Russellian truth-evaluation of utterances of sentences with descriptions. The complex Russellian proposition is, according to the author's view, introduced by such utterances into communication as a by-product of the instrumental side of an attempt to make a singular statement. This, precisely like the instrumental aspects of similar attempts exploiting names or demonstratives has to be reflected by analysis but should not be confused with the communicative function of utterances. The success of all these attempts depends on the fulfilment of empirical conditions of various types, given by semantics of descriptions, names or demonstratives (unless the relevance of these conditions is neutralized by another identificatory factor dominating in given context). But their communicative function does not consist in claiming that these conditions are fulfilled.

The author agrees with Strawson that the first two conjuncts of the complex Russellian proposition are introduced into communication as presuppositions: but argues in favour of defining presupposition (in pragmatic sense) in normative, rather the intentional terms.

**Keywords:** description, reference, truth-value, identification, presupposition.

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It would be inspiring to collect and compare all the arguments which appeared within the dispute between the proponents of the Russellian and Strawsonian account of descriptions. It would, no doubt, show a lot about the development of the views on the role and status of the philosophico-logical analysis, on what is semantically relevant and on the

relation between semantics and pragmatics. Peter Strawson himself has made already in 1964 (here: Strawson 1971c) a preliminary survey of “short” (or “quick”) arguments which have been applied against his or Russellian principle of truth-evaluation (of sentences with descriptions). The conclusion was that they did not work (no matter whether they have been suggested by Russellians (f-party) or Strawsonians (gap-party) and that the debate continues. But in the same article he, very honestly, pointed to certain limit of his own position: he argued that in some cases the Russellian truth-evaluation matches better our communicative intuitions, i.e. better corresponds to the way in which we would evaluate an utterance in the actual communication. He identified them as the cases in which the description which is not uniquely satisfied by any individual (or, as he puts it, the descriptive term “guilty in reference failure”) finds itself in the focus of the utterance.

This appeal to the topic-focus distinction, presenting it as relevant in such a fundamental respect as is the truth-evaluation, is quite interesting in the context of Strawson’s work, in particular in the light of his theory of predication. There he argues that the topic-focus distinction is too superficial to serve as a criterion for the subject-predicate distinction. The only really substantial criterion is provided by the opposition between particulars and general concepts: from this basic opposition Strawson derives, step by step and with great precision, a hierarchically ordered system of logico-grammatical asymmetries between subject-terms and predicate-terms.<sup>1</sup> This system provides no space for the application of the aboutness criterion. The only relevant alternative to the category criterion Strawson admits concerns the way in which subject and predicate term identifies some item for the audience: the former, but not the latter fulfils its identificatory role via manifesting and invoking in the audience an empirical knowledge that there exists precisely one item satisfying certain conditions.<sup>2</sup> But this characteristics of the subject-predicate distinction is

<sup>1</sup> I have attempted to represent the system of asymmetries in a single scheme in introductory article to the Slovak translation of *Individuals*: Kořátko (1997). The main reference is of course Strawson (1974), but a lot of subtle analytical work in this field has been done already in Strawson (1959) and in articles like Strawson (1971b, c, d).

<sup>2</sup> The term “invoking knowledge” (rather than “creating knowledge”) corresponds to Strawson’s insisting that propositions of existence and uniqueness are here not stated but introduced into discourse as presuppositions: later we will (critically) return to Strawson’s interpretation of this move.

allowed to play only a subsidiary role and its applicability is controlled by the categorial (also: “type”) criterion.<sup>3</sup>

It has not been so from the very beginning. In Strawson’s classical article attacking Russell’s theory of descriptions (Strawson 1971a) it was precisely the other way round. Here the identificatory and aboutness principle were introduced together (invoking identifying knowledge was presented as a way of specifying what was the statement about) and directly linked to the “conventional grammatical classification of subject and predicate”. The particulars-general concepts opposition was then presented as derived from (as a “pseudo-material shadow” of) this “functional linguistic distinction”.<sup>4</sup>

But already in *Individuals* this relation is converted, the subject-predicate distinction is derived from the “basic categorial opposition” and the aboutness criterion is dismissed as irrelevant (with respect to this distinction).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> “The exclusive way in which the identificatory criterion is applied reflects our acceptance of the type criterion”; cf. Strawson (1971b, 84). The identificatory criterion obviously does not give any result with respect to sentences like “The Czech president has the most typical property of politicians”. Sentences like “Modesty is rare among politicians” where two terms introducing general concepts are propositionally combined, seem to equally paralyze the category criterion. But its authority is preserved by Strawson’s presumption that the first concept is (in this combination) introduced “like particular”, i.e. presented as collected by the second concept in a way which reduplicates (or is parasitic upon) the relation of collecting (or grouping) between particulars and general concepts, as it is presented in “basic” (i.e. singular) sentences; cf. Strawson (1974, 35 – 36). As Strawson (1987) insists in polemics with Wiggins (1984), this does not have any implications concerning the ontological status of the item introduced by the first term.

<sup>4</sup> Between specifying what we are speaking about (identifying function) and specifying what we are saying about it (ascriptive or attributive function); cf. Strawson (1971a, 17 – 18).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g. Strawson (1959, 143 – 147). Frege’s approach to the topic-focus distinction exhibits a similar kind of dynamics. On the one side, Frege wants to free the logical analysis from any dependence on it (taking it as purely psychological), and that’s why explicitly (though in actual usage not quite consequently) resigns on the terms “subject” and “predicate”, which he takes as firmly connected with it; cf. Frege (1879, par. 3, 9). But it comes out (in Frege 1966) that he cannot get rid of it even on the basic semantic level. Since in his account, when an expression referring to the concept (“Begriffswort”) is shifted to the position in which it serves to specify the entity talked about, it loses the ability to refer to something function-like, unsatiated (“ungessättigt, ergänzungsbedürftig”): instead of referring to a concept, it now refers to an abstract object.

But let us abstract from these connections and focus on the theory of descriptions itself. Here, as we have seen, the topic-focus distinction proves its relevance and leads Strawson to admitting that even if we concentrate on the communicative function of descriptions (which is supposed to be the domain where his theory finds its motivation and support), or better: *precisely* when we focus on this, we identify cases where the Russellian truth-evaluation does better. As far as the *general* arguments against the Strawsonian truth-evaluation are concerned, there is one which I find particularly strong. I mean a simple point made in Grice (1970): if nothing true nor false is expressed by the utterance of "The king of France is bald" and if we want to keep the presumption that proposition is something which is true or false, then there is no proposition which could presuppose the proposition that there exists a king of France, and hence there is no space for presupposing, taken as a relation between propositions. I have not read Strawson's explicit reaction on this criticism. But I have pointed to Grice's argument during the meeting of Peter Strawson with Czech philosophers in 1994 (in Villa Lanna, Prague). His reply was that for this reason he prefers to restrict himself to the pragmatic notion of presupposition: presupposing in pragmatic sense is an element of the speaker's communicative act rather than logical relation between propositions.<sup>6</sup>

In any case, my aim is not to go through the possible arguments against Strawsonian truth-evaluation and possible replies to them. I will try to explain my positive reasons for accepting the Russellian truth-evaluation – via explaining the role I attach to it in the evaluation of the communicative function of sentences with descriptions. But this role will be better understandable if I start by explaining my reasons why not to be Russellian in another respect, namely why to approach definite descriptions as genuine devices of singular reference, rather than to restrict ourselves to treating them as devices of quantification. Hence, the position I want to defend combines the Russell's truth-evaluation with Strawson's insisting that descriptions serve to refer to individuals.

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<sup>6</sup> This corresponds to his position in *Identifying Reference and Truth Values* (1971c); cf. Neale (1990, 55, note 26).

Let me start with an intuition which, as far as I can see, supports more than any other the inclination to regard definite descriptions as referential expressions par excellence. It should be taken seriously, rather than submitted to philosophical therapy or “explained away”, because it has a respectable source: our communicative practice and our awareness (based on our participation in this practice) of what we can do, and what we often do, in order to fulfil our communicative intentions. The intuition I have in mind can be described as follows. Suppose I want to manifest my belief that certain person is a respected climatologist and cannot pick out that person by using proper name (since I do not know it) or by pointing to him or her (since he or she is not present). Fortunately, this does not imply that I have to resign on my project: I can still pick out the person by explicitly specifying conditions uniquely satisfied by it, in other words by describing it. This is the intuition I want to take seriously, instead of trying to convince the ordinary speaker that in such a case he gives up his original project and undertakes another one. That would contradict the way in which we evaluate these cases in actual communication – and that’s a test which, I believe, should weight more than the loyalty to our favourite theory.

For instance, when John utters the sentence

- 1) The Czech president is a respected climatologist,

he does something which we normally appreciate in *de re* reports like:

- 2) John said about Václav Klaus that he is a respected climatologist

or

- 3) John said about this man that he is a respected climatologist

etc. And Václav Klaus can appreciate John’s achievement by feeling flattered or by decorating him with a medal.

There seems to be a conflict between this aspect of our communicative practices and the theory denying that any individual is involved in what John has said by using the sentence with description. The orthodox Russellians should of course feel obliged to show that the conflict or the gap is only a *prima facie* one: and this is the place where the theoretical constructive creativity (the theoretical engineering) can do its job. If you are familiar with the mechanism of Gricean implicatures, you can build it in, in order to fill in the gap. You can then say: what are these reporters

reacting on is in fact not what is directly said in John's utterance but what is implicated by it due to special circumstances: and you can (very easily) construe the chain of inferences generating the implicature, namely leading from a general Russellian proposition and certain contextual presumptions to a singular statement (cf. Neale 1990, 89). And you can insist that the starting point of this chain, the Russellian proposition, is the only content of what is directly said in his utterance.

When put so straightforwardly, it immediately creates certain problem. Nobody will claim that reports like "He said about the notion of the Czech president that it is (in the present moment) exemplified by precisely one person and that whoever satisfies that notion satisfies the notion of being bald" or "He said about the world that the notion of the Czech president is exemplified in it in the present moment by precisely one person and that whoever..." could be taken seriously as identifying what has been communicated by the utterance of 1). The same concerns the *de dicto* reports: "He said that the notion of the Czech president is exemplified by precisely one person..." or "He said that there is precisely one Czech president..." would be found equally extravagant, if not grotesque. They would be evaluated as totally missing the *communicative function* of the utterance of 1), despite the fact that nobody who utters 1) or assents to it can coherently fail to assent to the Russellian propositions specified in these reports. If you object that no proponent of Russell's theory would propose such bizarre statement reports, I will have to ask you how should I then understand the claim that it is the Russellian proposition which is the content of what is literally said or asserted by the utterance of 1)? When claiming this you are speaking about what's going on in communication: and our account of the content of communicative acts simply cannot isolate them from the communicative reactions on them, in particular from the ways in which they are reported about (I mean reports which are accepted as appropriate in the linguistic community in question).

Obviously, the assertive use of 1) commits me to assenting to a sentence explicitly expressing the relevant Russellian proposition. But equally obviously, the fact that an utterance commits you to assenting to certain sentence does not imply that the sentence can be used to specify the content of what you have said. When John says "Mary is a student", he is certainly committed to assent to the claim that the shadow of Mary is a shadow of a student: but it would hardly make sense to report about his utterance by saying "John claimed that the shadow of Mary is a

shadow of a student”, despite all the impressive stuff written about proxy functions and inscrutability of reference. Or consider the following example from Wittgenstein (1953, par. 22):

We might very well write every statement in the form of a question followed by a ‘Yes’; for instance: ‘Is it raining? Yes!’ Would this show that every statement contained a question?

Obviously, somebody who says “It’s raining” is committed to reply “Yes” to the question “Is it raining?”. But it would be bizarre to report about his statement by saying: “He asked whether it is raining and replied ‘Yes’”.

There is a difference, as you may properly argue: the “quasi-Russellian” statement reports are, unlike those just mentioned, derived from a well based analysis of the truth conditions of the type of sentences in question (sentences with descriptions). I do not suggest that we should challenge the analysis, nor the claim that it shows something relevant about what happens in the communicative sense when a speaker utters a sentence with description. The question rather is how to understand the status of the Russellian complex proposition within what happens by the utterance, in other words, how to specify the way in which the Russellian proposition is introduced into discourse by the utterance. The absurdity of certain statement reports I have mentioned indicates that it is not expressed on the level of what is said in the utterance.

On the other side, the claim that the *de re* reports like

2) John said about Václav Klaus that he is a respected climatologist

really succeed to reproduce what has been said, rather than implicated, is based on a good evidence: their justification does not at all presuppose that we can reasonably ascribe to the speaker the intentions required by the Gricean implicature mechanism. It is quite sufficient if we can presuppose that he used the sentence mentioned in the standard way, i.e. that he believed that the description used is satisfied by precisely one person and that he wanted to make a statement about that person. In particular, if John utters

1) The Czech president is a respected climatologist,

it is quite proper to report about the statement he made by saying

2) John said about Václav Klaus that he is a respected climatologist

even if we do not have any reason to believe that John knows that the Czech president is called Václav Klaus, nor that he intends to produce in the audience's mind a chain of inferences leading from the literal meaning of the utterance to the implicature

3) Václav Klaus is a respected climatologist,

nor that he relies (on the basis of his belief about the audience's background knowledge) on the audience's ability to work out the implicature, on the audience's ability to recognize that he is intended to work it out, etc.

I have admitted that in uttering 1) I introduce into discourse, and in this sense express, both a singular proposition about a person and a complex Russellian proposition. Let me now say a bit more about the relation between these two moves. In saying "The *F* is *G*" you apply and thereby introduce into communication certain notions, *F* and *G*, in a way which commits you to certain beliefs about the world, concerning the exemplification of *F* and *G* in the world. Or, as you can put it correlatively, you incur commitment to certain beliefs about these notions, concerning their exemplification in the world. Namely, you commit yourself to believing that the world is such, or correlatively that these notions are such, that the first notion (*F*) is uniquely exemplified in the world (in the time of the utterance) and that whatever or whoever exemplifies the first notion, exemplifies (in the time of the utterance) the second one (*G*) as well.

The word "whoever", as used in this context, invites certain popular misinterpretations concerning the communicative role, as well as cognitive basis and function of utterances with descriptions. The same concerns the "whoever he is" clause as explicitly used in the utterance, e.g. of "The Czech president, whoever he is, is the best climatologist in the world." Let me start with this case. Can we interpret it so that the speaker presents himself in his utterance as not intending to speak about any particular individual, and hence that he does not use the description as a singular term? This seems to be plainly wrong, because you can equally naturally say: "John Smith, whoever he is..." or "This man, whoever he is..." In neither of these cases does the "whoever he is" clause serve to indicate that you do not intend to speak about particular individual: it just indicates that you do not have any other device of identifying the individual you intend to speak about, than the one you have actually used: the particular name, demonstration, description. Or that you leave

the other ways of identification (of the given individual) open. This does not imply, in neither of these cases, that the device of identification which you *have* (and which you have used) is not sufficient. You need not have any other means of identification in addition to this one, in order to get genuine identificatory knowledge. It is enough if you justifiably and truly believe that the device of identification in your possession (description, name, demonstrative) actually does its work, i.e. picks out precisely one individual – and it provides you with a piece of identifying knowledge.

In other words, the fact that you are unable to give a non-trivial reply to questions like “Who is the Czech president”, “Who is Vaclav Klaus” or “Who is that man” does not imply that the description, name or demonstrative in question cannot play proper identificatory function when used by you and cannot provide you with genuine identifying knowledge. Correlatively, if *you* explicitly ask some of these questions (“Who is the Czech president”, “Who is John Smith” or “Who is this man”), you do not manifest belief that the description, demonstration or name is not sufficient to identify an individual: you manifest your wish to get, in addition to the means of identification you have just used, also another one, which would be useful for your practical or cognitive purposes. Names, demonstrations, descriptions can appear in both positions: as the actually applied device of identification or as the required one; and all combinations are possible (description-name, name-description, description-description etc.). For instance, if the inspector finds the name “John Smith” in the victim’s diary, he may naturally ask who is this John Smith and the reply “the Mayor of London” can be perfect for his purposes. If he sees a masked man disappearing in the darks of Soho, he may ask “Who is this man?” and the reply “the Mayor of London” is perfect for his purposes, much better, I would say, than “John Smith”.

In Peter Strawson’s words, when I use description in sentences like

- 1) The Czech president is a respected climatologist,

I invoke in you (as my audience) identifying knowledge of an individual (cf. esp. Strawson 1971a, c). The content of this identifying knowledge amounts to the proposition that there exists (in the time of the utterance) precisely one Czech president. Another way of putting this is to say that in uttering 1) this proposition is introduced into discourse as presuppo-

sition. The interpretation of this communicative move (and hence also the definition of presupposition) is a potentially controversial issue. I think it should be given in normative, rather than intentional terms: the speaker  $S$  presupposes that  $p$  in his utterance  $U$  with respect to the audience  $A$  if and only if  $U$  commits  $S$  to believing that  $p$  and that  $A$  shares this belief or is at least ready to accept that  $p$  as the non-controversial background of communication. The speaker uttering "Your husband's girlfriend has been on TV yesterday" introduces into communication the proposition "There exists precisely one girlfriend of your husband" ( $p$ ) even if he does not believe that  $p$  neither ascribes the belief that  $p$  to the audience. His intention may quite consistently be to produce in the audience the (false) belief that  $p$  and at the same time to present  $p$  as a matter of shared knowledge, and hence not be regarded as a denouncer. If so, Strawson cannot be right when saying

The very task of identifying reference can be undertaken only by the speaker who knows or presumes the hearer to be already in possession of such knowledge of existence and uniqueness.<sup>7</sup>

And the same criticism applies to Stalnaker's definition of presupposition given in intentional terms (cf. Stalnaker 1991, 473). Strawson has interpreted counter-examples of the kind I have used as indicating that "ordinary language has no exact logic" (Strawson 1971a, 27). I believe, on the contrary, that such (sneaky) communicative tricks prove more than anything else the existence and effectiveness of the functions of language they exploit.

In any case, by invoking identifying knowledge of some individual in you (as my audience) I make that individual the topic of our discourse, or if you wish, I give you the individual, in the communicative and cognitive sense of "giving something to somebody".<sup>8</sup> One might feel tempted to object that what I give you is *just* an identifying procedure or mode of presentation: but I would have problems with assigning any reasonable sense to that "just". When you ask "Who killed Kennedy" and I reply

<sup>7</sup> Cf. P. Strawson (1971c, 80). The same concerns Gareth Evans' claim that if the function of the expressions of the form "that  $F$ " is "to invoke antecedently existing information", we have a "cast-iron guarantee" that the sentence of the form "That  $F$  is  $P$ " cannot be used to inform the audience that something is  $F$ ". Cf. Evans (1982, 312, note 10).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Dummett has remarked that "even when Frege is purporting to give the sense of a word or symbol, what he actually states is what the reference is". Cf. Dummett (1973, 227).

“the chief of his guard”, I guess you would hardly protest: “I have asked you who was the killer and instead of replying you are describing him.” It would be equally extravagant like to say: “I have asked you who was the killer and you tell me how he is called” or “I have asked you who killed Kennedy and you point to some chap.”

It would similarly miss the point if you wanted to demonstrate the weakness or indirectness of the identificatory force of descriptions by saying: the description *D* can identify an individual *X* only when conjoined with the fact (or with the premise) that *X* uniquely satisfies *D*.<sup>9</sup> When I use description in sentences like 1), I apply it on the world, exploiting the relation of satisfaction as a part of the identificatory mechanism of descriptive identification, i.e. presupposing that it picks out precisely one individual.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, when I use a name in the same position, I exploit its connection with an individual (via the Kripkean causal chain), which includes presupposing that there is just one contextually relevant chain and that picks out precisely one individual. And when I use a demonstrative in connection with a pointing gesture, I rely on certain configuration of objects in my vicinity: I presuppose that it is such that precisely one object in the world is picked out by my utterance plus my gesture. In all these cases, I rely on certain empirical facts as involved in the mechanism of identification, in other words I presuppose that the factual conditions of success of my identificatory project are fulfilled. And in all these cases this presumption can be mistaken. It would be

<sup>9</sup> Somebody might claim, that the object-independence of the utterances of sentences with descriptions is obvious from the mere fact that the sentence “The king of France is bald” does not mention any individual at all. But the same can be said about the sentence “He is bald” or “John Smith is bald”. The sentence-types, as Strawson has famously emphasized (in Strawson 1971a), do not refer to anything: still, the pronoun and name in the last two sentences are good instruments for referring to individuals, under favorable circumstances. The same concerns descriptions. Correlatively, some authors, like Peacocke (1975, 117), Tichý (1978) and Neale (1990, 22 - 23) have argued that no particular individual plays any role in the truth-evaluation of utterances of sentences of the kind mentioned. I have discussed this claim and its possible relevance for the dispute about descriptions in Kořátko (1993) and in Kořátko (1995).

<sup>10</sup> In other words, the “premise” mentioned above (“Václav Klaus is the Czech president”) only specifies the contribution of the world, the world-input required by the identificatory mechanism; it provides a concrete substitute for the phrase “things being as they are” in the claim “Things being as they are, the description ‘the Czech president’, when uttered now, identifies Václav Klaus”.

hardly acceptable to insist that in one of these cases the possibility of failure makes the identification weak or indirect, while in others not. If the relevant factual conditions are fulfilled, the description, name or demonstrative are devices of identification.

But let us return to the “whoever he is” clause. Keith Donnellan has used it as a test for distinguishing the attributive use of descriptions from the referential one: if it is applicable, we have the attributive case (cf. Donnellan 1966). But it is important not only to ask whether it is applicable, but what is its communicative function, and hence what does its applicability or non-applicability precisely show. In fact, my earlier specification of this function fully corresponds to Donnellan’s presentation of the difference between the situations in which the descriptions are used attributively and those in which they are used referentially. In the former cases we do not have any independent instruments of identification of an individual, while in the latter we do. The general picture which we can quite naturally extract from his examples is as follows:

- (1) The referential relation between description and an individual obtains only if there is another factor (than the satisfaction relation between description and an individual) relating the given utterance of description to particular individual.
- (2) The identificatory force of this factor is more powerful (with respect to the referential role of description) than the identificatory force of the relation of satisfaction between description and the object which uniquely satisfies it: if there is a conflict between these two, the former one outweighs (dominates, nullifies, blocks) the latter one.

I have already rejected the first claim: the satisfaction relation between the description and an individual is sufficient to establish referential relation.<sup>11</sup> I reject the second claim too and suggest the following, as

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Saul Kripke (1977) as a prominent representative of this approach. When he defines his notion of “semantic referent”, he adds that in case of definite descriptions it is the entity satisfying the description. It is then open to us to use a description with the “simple intention”, namely to refer to its semantic referent, i.e. to an object satisfying it. Another thing is that in special circumstances we can instead have a “complex intention”, namely to refer by means of the description to some independently identified object, about which we believe that it is identical with the semantic referent. This last condition (speaker’s belief that the intended satisfies the description) is too restrictive: cf. the well-known Donnellan’s example (“the king”) in Donnellan (1966).

an alternative to both claims taken together: linguistic devices of identification of any kind (name, demonstrative, description) can be used in a situation in which also instruments of other kinds or other identificatory factors are efficient. And these other devices or factors can prove to be more powerful than the standard identificatory role of the expressions uttered. Descriptions are in this respect in principle no more submissive, i.e. their identificatory force is in general not weaker than that of names or demonstratives: I do not see any theoretical motivation to claim that it is – and, much more importantly, such a claim would be empirically false. Let us consider the following example:

The Mayor's car is coming to the Prague City Hall, somebody in the crowd points to a person stepping out and shouts "The Mayor should resign!" I suppose he succeeded to say about the Mayor of Prague that he should resign even if the man he is pointing at happens to be one of the Mayor's assistants. Unlike in Donnellan's well-known examples, here the descriptive identification proves to be stronger than demonstration.

Or: a crowd of demonstrators is commenting upon an arrival of the Mayor's car: you can hear shouts like: "The Mayor is coming!" etc. One of them points to the car shouting "That gentleman should change his job!" I would say that he succeeded to say about the Mayor of Prague that he should change his job, even if the only person sitting in the car is the Mayor's assistant. The situation, as I have presented it, creates a context in which the person spoken about is descriptively identified as the Mayor of Prague, even if the speaker has used demonstrative (and demonstration) picking out a person which does not satisfy the description. Nothing is easier than imagining situations of this kind, and we would certainly find examples of utterances which will not have unambiguous interpretation (i.e. it will not be clear which of the ways of identification involved in the given situation should be taken as more effective).

In general: linguistic identification of an empirical object *O* is bound to fulfilment of empirical conditions of the kind specific for the device uttered: *O* satisfies the description uttered or *O* is linked by the contextually relevant chain with the name uttered or *O* occupies a position in the vicinity which makes it the best candidate for the referent of the demonstrative uttered. This holds, in all the cases mentioned, unless some other identificatory factor present in the circumstances of the ut-

terance, outweighs the relevance of the fulfilment of the conditions mentioned. The identificatory mechanism normally connected with the expression used is then inefficient: this may happen to descriptions, as Donnellan (1966) has famously shown, to names, as Kripke (1977) has pointed out in his comments on Donnellan, as well as to demonstratives, as we have just seen. And the descriptive identification, based on the satisfaction relation, can be the one which wins the competition, even if no description is explicitly uttered by the speaker, as my second example purported to show.

I have spent a lot of time by defending the claim that, besides the complex Russellian proposition, also a singular proposition is expressed by the utterance of sentences like

1) The Czech president is a respected climatologist

under favourite circumstances, which means: provided that the description uttered is satisfied precisely by one entity – unless the relevance of this fact is neutralized by another identificatory factor dominating in a given situation. If the circumstances are not favourable, no singular proposition is expressed, which is a communicative failure, more serious one than expressing a false statement. This failure is to be incalculated into our communicative score, in addition to the fact that a false proposition has been introduced into discourse, namely the complex Russellian proposition with the false first conjunct (and hence false as a whole). According to this evaluation, the situation is slightly better than in Strawson's account, since false proposition has been expressed, and slightly worse than in Russell's account, since besides failing to say something true we have failed to make a singular statement. That means that the communicative function to which the utterance aspired has collapsed.<sup>12</sup>

The Russellian proposition is more fundamental in that sense that it is expressed in any case, independently on circumstances of the utterance.<sup>13</sup> It is introduced into communication as a by-product of an at-

<sup>12</sup> The very idea that in one and the same utterance more than one proposition can be introduced into discourse is by far not rare or extravagant. John Perry, for instance, has applied a version of it in case of sentences with indexicals; cf. Perry (1993); more recent version of the "multiple-proposition approach" cf. in Corazza (2004, Ch. 3).

<sup>13</sup> This is an attraction for those who want to isolate as far as possible the semantic analysis of expressions from the situations of their use, or, more generally, emancipate it from references to the extralinguistic world as far as it goes. This nicely reduces the

tempt to make a singular statement and this move is not cancelled, i.e. it remains effective even if the attempt fails. But this should not impress us to that extent that we overlook the intended communicative function of the utterance. Let me offer you an analogy. If I attempt to kill a fly supposed to be on the table by swatting it with a flapper I perform certain move which remains part of what I did independently of whether I hit or miss the fly and independently of whether there is any fly on the table at all. But this does not mean that the physical move is the only relevant thing to be grasped by the description of what happened. Similarly, when attempting to point to certain object I make a gesture, i.e. my hand goes through certain move and this achievement remains part, or aspect of what I did independently of whether there is any identifiable object in the relevant direction (it is not cancelled or nullified even if I had a hallucination or wanted to deceive others). But this does not mean that the physical move of the hand is the only relevant thing deserving our attention. Human hand with an outstretched forefinger is an interesting thing to study, but that should not make us to overlook that the hand is pointing to an object or at least manifesting an attempt to do so. Monkeys, very small children and Stan Laurel in some slapsticks do not look in the direction of the pointing gesture but persistently observe the pointing hand: I suggest not to follow them in the philosophy of language.

I hope you will tolerate one more analogy. Let us imagine a painter depicting the face of some celebrity by arranging colour patches in certain configurations on the canvas. Similarly, I am saying something about an individual by uttering linguistic expressions in certain configuration, thereby introducing into communication certain notions related to one another in a certain way. In both cases you can, if you wish, classify the representation of an individual or the singular reference as mediated by the moves I have just described, and hence as indirect. But then there will be no space for a direct representation or reference at all and

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number of factors the analysis has to take into account and hence makes the analysis more homogeneous and elegant. But this can hardly impress those who are primarily interested in the ways in which expressing propositions by means of linguistic utterances is anchored in the relations of actual communicants to the world and to one another. Utterance meanings as well as sentence-type meanings acquire their determinedness and identifiability only from this context: the more you emancipate your theory from it, the more you proceed from analyzing language to theoretical constructivism or engineering.

the distinction indirect-direct will (in this area) totally collapse. I suggest to reserve the term "indirect" for cases in which the factors like Gricean implicature mechanisms are involved. In the cases I have mentioned it will do to say that representation, reference, speaking about something has always its instrumental side. This should not prevent us from admitting that when uttering the name "John Smith", I am directly speaking about the man X, if he is linked with that name by that causal chain which is the only activated one in the given context; similarly when uttering "this man" I am directly speaking about the man X, if he is the only relevant candidate in my vicinity; and quite analogically, when uttering "the Czech president" I am directly speaking about the man X, if he is the only person satisfying the description in the time of the utterance. In general, we should not blur the distinction between the direct and indirect referring to something and speaking about something by misinterpreting the trivial fact that the enterprise of referring to something and speaking about something has always its instrumental side. This side deserves close attention: but should never be confused with what we are speaking about when using an expression.

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