Book Review

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Paul Elbourne, *Definite Descriptions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 2013, 272 pp, £24.99 (paper).

Paul Elbourne's compelling monograph argues that definite descriptions (DDs) refer to individuals, as Frege famously claimed, going against major currents in philosophy of language. It modifies its author's earlier stance that pronouns are Fregean definite descriptions by presenting a much more thorough view, though one which I think demands rethinking. Putting aside Saxon genitives ('Mary's cat'), Elbourne focuses on singular determiner phrases whose determiner is the definite article. While Frege only made brief comments on DDs, they were distinctive enough to create a vast philosophical literature. He believed, Elbourne summarises, that DDs are 'formed by combining the (singular) definite article with expressions that denote concepts' (2013: 42). *Definite Descriptions* also contains some comments on the author's previous account of donkey anaphora and 'Voldemort phrases', such as 'He who hesitates is lost'. What follows are select quotations and comments, inevitably doing little justice to the intricacy of Elbourne's study.

Elbourne adopts Neale's useful terminology that a DD is *proper* if its nominal is true of exactly one thing and *improper* otherwise, and *empty* if its nominal is true of nothing and *incomplete* if true of more than one thing. With this in mind, Frege's comments on improper descriptions denoting 0 (as with, some would argue, his writings on reference (Chomsky 2000: 130; Hinzen 2007)) are not a serious analysis of natural language and its relation to mind-independent entities, but appear to Elbourne rather as 'a special stipulation for the practice of mathematics, designed to prevent mathematical terms from being without referents' (43). Hence we also find philosophers like Donnellan (1966) distinguishing between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions, stressing the importance of individual interests and intentions.

Despite Galen Strawson's (2008: 8) reasonable claim that the twentieth century was 'the silliest of all the centuries, philosophically speaking (for all its achievements)', it nevertheless produced a vast literature on DDs, which Elbourne puts under his Fregean lens. His rigorous and enjoyable scrutiny leads him to depart from Russell and Neale's view (which holds that DDs are

Elliot Murphy: Division of Psychology and Language Sciences, University College London.
E-mail: elliot.murphy.13@ucl.ac.uk

quantifiers), along with Devitt's view that they are ambiguous between quantifiers and a referential reading, Fara's view that they are predicates, and Szabó's view that they are indefinites. Elbourne sets out instead to argue for what he calls the Fregean theory; that DDs are 'basically referential and introduce a presupposition to the effect that there is a unique entity that satisfies the nominal descriptive content' (2).

Elbourne leaves aside Frege's comments on presupposition, though he evaluates that Frege's position would in all likelihood have been that a DD in an asserted sentence generates the presupposition that there is precisely one 'thing' falling under the relevant concept. The argument of *Definite Descriptions* is based on this view, though it is modified when taking into consideration developments in syntactic theory and semantics in generative grammar. DDs are often bound by modal operators, for instance, in which case they escape Frege's referential fitting. When used assertively declarative sentences containing DDs introduce the sort of presupposition Frege discussed; although, complicating things, the presupposition itself may be 'relativized to relevant sets of situations or worlds, even in sentences that look as if they are not modalized' (45).

Despite these qualifications, Elbourne's theory remains undoubtedly Fregean, and not simply in the sense that it is not Russellian. He maintains strongly that Frege was right in claiming that DDs are often referential (though, as mentioned, can also be bound) and points out that talk of a 'Fregean-Strawson theory' can be misleading, since Strawson (1950) believed DDs are referential and presuppose that an object to which they refer exists, and that an empty description has no referent. With all this Frege would agree, however Elbourne observes that Strawson (1950: 332) also held that DDs were presented with no problem when more than one object fell under the relevant concept ('the table' in the sentence 'the table is covered with books' will still have application if there is more than one table, contra Russell). Elbourne handles such 'incomplete' uses of DDs by relativizing the uniqueness condition – which Strawson saw no need for – to particular situations (46; see Frege 1892: 41–2). Elbourne consequently assumes that the definite article takes two arguments, an NP and a situation pronoun: [[the NP]*s*]. This leads to the following lexical entry:

$$[\![\text{the}]\!] = \lambda f_{<e,st>}.\lambda s : s \in D_s \,\&\, \exists! x f(x)(s) = 1.\ \iota x f(x)(s) = 1$$

This elegant framework helps Elbourne discard with some theoretical baggage found in his *Situations and Individuals* (2005), which held that (i) DDs integrated variables which were introduced in referential uses and c-commanded bound variable anaphora, and (ii) donkey anaphoric uses of DDs were dependent on situation variables being bound in the metalanguage. All of these aspects are now

handled purely by situation pronouns, which are responsible both for the relativization of the uniquenesss condition and the bound and donkey anaphoric uses of DDs.

Fleshing out his technical apparatus, Elbourne follows Kratzer (1989) and Armstrong (1978) in using the notion of a situation, *s*, such that *s* is part of a situation *s′* if and only if *s′* contains all the particulars *s* does, 'instantiating all the properties and relations that they instantiate in *s*' (where individuals, or 'particulars', instantiate universals) (24). Using this familiar background, accompanied by the notion of a *minimal situation* (a situation, *s*, such that a proposition, *p*, is true in it is one which contains the bare number of particulars and relations which will make *p* true (Elbourne 2005)), he convincingly shows that Austinian topic situations come into trouble with the sentence 'Everyone is asleep and is being monitored by a research assistant', analysing it as:

> <*s****, λ*s*. every person in *s* is asleep in *s* and is being monitored in *s* by a research assistant in *s*>

As Soames (1986) observed, there can be no topic situation *s**** in which (a) every person is asleep, and (b) every person is being monitored by a research assistant (who is not asleep). Instead, we need:

> <*s****, λ*s*. every person in *s** is asleep in *s* and is being monitored in *s* by a research assistant in *s*>

In this proposition the restrictor situation *s** contains only the asleep subjects, unlike the more encompassing topic situation *s****; the existence of both has been supported by good evidence from Recanti (2004) and others.

In addition, Elbourne adopts into his situation semantics Percus' (2000) Generalizations X and Y, which are, respectively: the situation pronoun that a verb selects for must be coindexed with the nearest λ above it; the situation pronoun that an adverbial quantifier selects for must be coindexed with the nearest λ above it. For instance, if situation pronouns are bound by λ-operators situated at the top of each Complementizer Phrase, and if each predicate is associated with these pronouns, then 'Walt thinks my batch glistens' would be simplified as $[\lambda_1$ Walt thinks s_1 $[\lambda_2$ my batch s_1 glistens $s_2]]$.

The chapter on presupposition (the longest and most thorough in the book) stresses that Elbourne's theory 'emphasize[s] the way in which the satisfaction of presupposition is tied up with indexicality' (56). It analyses the presupposition projection behaviour of DDs with regards to negation, conditionals, disjunction and possibility modals. Presupposition projection is the phenomenon explored

by Heim (1983) whereby certain presuppositions of syntactically complex sentences become presuppositions of the entire construction while others do not. Even though many philosophers have noted that a presupposition can be cancelled if it falls within the scope of negation ('In this court, the knave didn't steal the tarts: the king employs no knaves'), Elbourne points out that this nevertheless gives rise to presupposition of sorts. It does not presuppose the knave's existence along Fregean or Strawsonian lines, but rather seems to presuppose that there is some reason to believe a knave will be at the court, preferably exactly one. Elbourne correspondingly proposes that 'the knave didn't steal the tarts' contains 'an unpronounced universal quantifier over possible situations', FIC, which permits us to talk about fictional entities when discussing the real world. This is paired with the morpheme QA_{FIC}, 'just as *always* and *sometimes* work in conjunction with the morpheme QA' (72). These morphemes have the following lexical entries:

$$[\![\text{FIC}]\!] = \lambda p_{<s,t>}.\lambda q_{<s,st>}.\lambda s.\text{ for every situation } s' \text{ such that } s' \text{ such that } s' \text{ is a minimal situation such that } p(s') = 1,\ q(s)(s') = 1$$

$$[\![\text{QA}_{\text{FIC}}]\!] = \lambda p_{<s,t>}.\lambda s.\lambda s'.p(s)$$

Elbourne's FIC operator is put to use in the chapter on existence entailments in a highly informative discussion of presupposition projection in propositional attitude ascriptions.

A later discussion surrounds what Glanzberg (2009) calls 'presupposition obviation'; cases in which empty definite descriptions do not yield judgments of presupposition failure but instead produce intuitions of falsity. Elbourne ultimately revises the presupposition obviation accounts of Von Fintel (2004) and Lasersohn (1993), who claimed that sentences are judged true or false on the basis of contextual beliefs, i.e. with respect to a body of information, *D*. The intuitive judgements Von Fintel writes as TRUE and FALSE differ from the language faculty assigning 1 or 0 to a sentence in a particular evaluative circumstance. Lasersohn's theory of everyday epistemic revision is integrated into Elbourne's account of judging sentences FALSE:

> Reject a sentence ϕ (with presupposition π) as FALSE with respect to a body of information *D* iff for all worlds *w* compatible with $\text{rev}_{\pi}(D)$: $[\![\phi]\!](w) = 0$

But even this account is not adequate. Consider 'The King of France is on a state visit to Australia this week'. This is not TRUE, but it is also not false in every world compatible with $\text{rev}_{\pi}(D)$, and so it is not FALSE either. Elbourne observes that people generally have in their 'belief box' the proposition 'There is no King

of France', though not the beliefs 'There is no King of France in Australia', 'No bald person is King of France', etc. Consequently, *Definite Descriptions* intelligently adopts the 'similarity relation' between worlds used by Lewis for the analysis of counterfactuals, along with Lewis' (1979) 'Conditions on the closeness relation between worlds'. So 'The King of France is bald' is not TRUE when evaluated at the actual world w_0 after 1848, but it is not FALSE either. Following Lewis, Elbourne believes we need to 'look at the set of closest π-worlds to the actual world, where π is the proposition that there is exactly one King of France'. The reason why 'The King of France is bald' is not FALSE, then, is because the simple supposed existence of a King of France says nothing about his hair (or lack thereof), and some of the π-worlds will contain a bald king, while others will not.

Revisions to Lewis' condition B on the closeness relation between worlds to integrate 'ties' between equally possible worlds (98–100) allow a satisfactory analysis of 'The King of France is on a state visit to Australia this week', 'The King of France is sitting in that chair', and many other examples. The closest π-worlds will be ones in which the King of France is secluded in his palace, and so the sentence is FALSE (Russell's (1905) belief that truth-judgements are binary affairs is consequently too simplistic and psychologically inflexible). This, to my mind, is the most considered and thorough account of presupposition obviation in the literature, and shows the importance of exploring possible world semantics, no matter their ontological absurdity: Though we can agree wholeheartedly with the internalist's frustration with the externalist conclusions of Burge (1988), Putnam (1975) and others, and although theories of belief revision can also incorporate notions of minimality or plausibility, we should also not forget how useful to semanticists and pragmatists inquiry into intuitions about possible worlds can be.

Many internalists have dismissed possible world semantics for the common reason that 'other worlds' do not actually, physically, *really* exist. Proponents of M-theory may beg to differ, but this is another matter – what is in question is not the status of 'other worlds' within fundamental physics, but rather the cognitive legitimacy of possible worlds and whether or not they can yield insight into the nature of concepts in a similar way that classical thought-experiments did (Zeno's paradoxes, etc.). Of course if semantic internalists intended their (legitimate and successful) attack on Twin Earth experiments to simply put meaning 'back into the head', and not discourage the sort of inquiry Elbourne engages in, then we can say 'go in peace' to Pietroski, Chomsky and Hinzen, but keep our copies of Lewis close at hand.

Although the focus of Elbourne's book is almost solely on DDs, some brief remarks should be made about his cursory but insightful comments on more

general problems, if only because of their uniqueness in a field still largely dominated by what we might call the holy trinity of philosophy of language: reference, representationalism, externalism. Elbourne prefaces his discussion with the following claim: 'I do not believe that there really are any such things as non-actual worlds or situations, not even in any of their popular "ersatz" versions'. He rejects externalism and believes – with Chomsky, Hinzen, Boeckx, Pietroski, McGilvray – that meanings are not part of some Twin Earth, but are rather 'simply some very interesting parts of our heads' (19). Elbourne's position rejects what Fodor and Lepore (1994) call 'Old Testament semantics' (grounded in externalism) and he has previously leant support for what Lohndal and Pietroski (2011) have called 'I-Semantics', or the notion that a concept is 'presumably a structure composed out of cells inside my head' (2011: 15). Likewise, Hinzen, with his Galilean naturalism, recently phrased the matter in the following terms: 'Theories of semantics are about a domain in nature that we do not understand' (2011: 417).

If Elbourne's Fregean theory has any holes, it would be in relation to recent work in syntax which could potentially disrupt some core assumptions. If Elbourne's internalism frees his semantics from one kind of referentialism (the externalist kind), then his theory of definiteness ties it to another kind; namely, the claim that the property of definiteness is inherently a property of lexical features. This (strong) definiteness-lexicon relation is not found in a recent study by Hinzen and Sheehan (2014) which explores the notion of definiteness as a product of phasal syntax. Under this view, the predicate-argument distinction, like definiteness, cannot be explained in terms of lexical class, since nouns and adjectives can function as predicates just as well as verbs, yielding propositions bearing truth values in the way that verbs do after Tense has been specified (Hinzen & Sheehan 2014: 64–5). Further, 'nouns need not denote objects either when they are used as predicates or parts of predicates. Ontology is not fixed at a lexical level, and Neo-Davidsonianism mixes up grammatical functions (including those encoded in the parts of speech) and lexical semantic classes' (73). 'This is the man' is referential when asserted, but when embedded as an argument it will act as a predicate applying to a mental event, as in 'believed [this is the man]', and will have no truth-value.

Following the standard model (Chomsky 2008), if a phase has an edge and interior, as in [EDGE[INTERIOR]], then the edge governs reference in the DD 'the man': [$_{E}$ the [$_{I}$ man]]. As lexical material moves to the edge of the phase, referentiality emerges, with more 'edge-heavy' phases bearing increased referentiality. Cartographic hierarchies deliver a fine structure to this phasal analysis: [C-T ... [v-V ... [D-N]]]. The lowest (first) phase can host nominals, which are presupposed in a mereological fashion as parts in second phase denotations (the

verbal phase). The nominal phase (call it the Fregean Phase) is mapped onto an 'object', and the ontologically distinct verbal phase (call it the Davidsonian Phase) onto an 'event', which is defined as such regardless of physical or temporal constitution – 'atomic decay' is just as much of an 'event' as 'cosmic expansion' or 'football game'. Finally, the clausal phase (call it the Russellian Phase) is mapped to a 'proposition'. Hence 'V *contains* N, necessarily, exactly as events *contain* objects' (Hinzen & Sheehan 2014: 107). Reference is induced by phase, then, and is an inherently *relational* notion, not a grammatical one, contrary to Elbourne's lexical and non-relational theory of meaning: 'Reference is a consequence of the phasal topology, not the categorical label 'Noun' ', as Hinzen and Sheehan put it (118), with these and other observations supporting Longobardi's (2005: 9) Topological Mapping Theory, under which object reference is yielded if and only if N-to-D movement has taken place; that is, interior-to-edge movement. If no interior-to-edge movement takes place, as in (1b), then object reference disappears:

(1) a. [The Manuel] I met in California isn't the one you know.
    b. I have [many Manuels] at my golf club.

This also explains Kripke's (1972) observation that descriptive properties associated with the referent of a proper name need not co-determine the referent's identity. Rigidity is thus a strictly grammatical phenomenon. DDs are not simply object-referential, then, but can also remain quantificational or predicative, and have no 'fixed' semantics: 'The question of whether "definite descriptions" are referential or attributive therefore cannot be answered: it is meaningless' (Hinzen & Sheehan 2014: 126). Likewise, indexicality is not a property of lexical items, but is rather indicative of a way a particular word can grammatically function. Given these – I think, highly plausible – perspectives, *Definite Descriptions* is incorrect in claiming that pronouns are covert DDs. Elbourne believes 3rd-person pronouns like 'he' project phrases like $[_{DP}[_{DP}[_{D}$ he$][\Phi\{$Pers, Num, Gen$\}]][_{NP}]]$, which are effectively similar to DPs, though this leads us to predict no semantic difference between DDs and pronouns.

On the question of whether numbers can be said to exist in a 'materialist' world, Elbourne thinks it likely that 'in discussing this system we are not doing ontology proper', but are rather exploring 'a system that is presupposed by some relevant module of the mind-brain, and which need not capture how the world actually works (although if we are lucky it might)' (24, n.12). Following Fodor and Chomsky, the world according to Elbourne appears different when our science-forming faculties are applied to it, which naturally come with cognitive 'scope and limits' (Russell 1948), 'bounds of sense' (Strawson 1966), and other such

things. Here is Hinzen again: 'Our minds have managed an analysis of the generative principle of number – an easy case – but they fail badly in the analysis of *house*, which is already much too complex, apparently, and maybe there is not much hope that we will ever succeed for something like *justice*'. Putting this disparity down to 'principled cognitive limitations', he notes that 'there are reasons for pessimism in this domain . . . which there may not be in the domain of the mathematical sciences, whose central concepts and modes of understanding are easier' (2007: 160–1).

Elbourne also claims he does 'not believe in abstract objects. For me, we can only talk about abstract objects in the way we can talk about Zeus' (215, n. 25). But this seems to miss something quite crucial: we cannot 'believe' in abstract objects any more than we can believe in the mass/count distinction. Any such nominalist claim will have to account for instances of copredication, when seemingly incompatible properties are attributed to a single object: The sentence 'The Powys book was brilliant but weighed a ton' attributes what Pustejovsky (1995) terms the 'dot objects' of INFORMATION and PHYSICAL OBJECT to the book, whereas 'Lunch was delicious but took forever' contains the predicates 'delicious' and 'took forever' (which should only be applicable to events) (Gotham 2012, Chomsky 2000). Questions of belief are irrelevant when exploring these aspects of the lexicon, which are presumably part of what Elbourne calls the 'structure[s] composed out of cells inside my head'.

Despite these differences, *Definite Descriptions* is a master class in philosophical argument and empirical inquiry, covering an impressive number of relevant topics supported by convincing arguments. His engaging monograph is the first in the Oxford Studies in Semantics and Pragmatics series, and if these titles aim to explore new domains in linguistics and philosophy in a careful and original way, Elbourne's thought-provoking study proves itself more than worthy of being first out of the gates.

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