

The Real Problem with Uniqueness

Abstract: Arguments against the Russellian theory of definite descriptions based on cases that involve failures of uniqueness are a recurrent theme in the relevant literature. In this paper I discuss a number of such arguments, from Strawson (1950), Ramachandran (1993), and Szabó (2005). I argue that the Russellian has resources to account for these data by deploying a variety of mechanisms of quantifier domain restrictions. Finally I present a case that is more problematic for the Russellian. While the previous cases all involve referential uses of descriptions (or some variations of such uses), the most effective objection to the uniqueness condition draws on genuine attributive uses.

Keywords: Russell, definite descriptions, uniqueness, Strawson, incompleteness

The Russellian theory of definite descriptions (henceforth RTD and, respectively, DDs), as usually conceived within natural language semantics, is not very popular among philosophers and linguists nowadays. Those who reject it usually invoke arguments that concern RTD's existential entailment.¹ But there is another line of argument against RTD, which I take to be equally powerful, and which focuses on RTD's *uniqueness* entailment. In this paper I discuss several objections to RTD that challenge its uniqueness entailment. I briefly look at Strawson's 1950 classical objection to RTD, as well as at three related "Strawsonian" objections, from Ramachandran (1993), and Szabó (2005). I argue that while they all highlight interesting phenomena, none of them pose serious problems to RTD. Finally, I discuss the "Strawsonian" argument that I take to be the most powerful, concerning data that the Russellian cannot account for.²

1. Strawson 1950

¹ See Strawson 1950, Lasersohn (1993), von Fintel (2004), Schoubye (2009) for an argument focused on non-denoting descriptions. See Heim (1991), Kripke (2005), Elbourne (2013) and Schoubye (2013) for an argument concerning the lack of existential entailment of DDs in the complements of non-doxastic propositional attitude verbs.

² For other arguments against the Russellian claim that uniqueness is part of the contribution to truth-conditions of DD see Szabó (2000), Ludlow and Segal (2004) and Haraldsen (2013).

Suppose that, upon entering my office, I realize that there is a huge pile of books on my table, and I utter with surprise sentence (1).

1. The table is covered with books.

According to RTD, this utterance of (1) is true iff *there is a unique table and it is covered with books*. Given that there is more than one table in the world of the context the prediction of the theory is that my utterance is *false*. But this is wrong: there is a strong intuition that this utterance of (1) is *true*. So, RTD makes obviously false predictions.

Although this objection is typically attributed to Strawson (1950), others have discussed the phenomenon of incomplete DDs before, as for instance, Quine (1940, 146-147).³ In contrast to Quine, however, Strawson uses the above data to show that the speaker of (1) does not *assert* existence and uniqueness, but rather “implies”, in the special sense that he later characterizes as “presupposing” (1964, 80), “that there is only one thing which is *both* of the kind specified (i.e. a table) *and is being referred to* by the speaker.” (1950, 333) In turn, Russell (1957, 385) replies to Strawson that he was only dealing with complete DDs such as ‘the king of France in 1905’. Indeed, the problem for RTD concerns *incomplete DDs*, and not complete ones (hence the label ‘the incompleteness problem’).⁴ If I replace ‘the table’ in (1) with ‘the table in front of me’ the problem for the Russellian disappears.

The incompleteness problem has led to an important amount of literature on how to “complete” incomplete DDs. In particular, Sainsbury (1979, 113-116), Davies (1981, 160-165), Neale (1990, 94-95) and others have pointed out that, if we assume RTD, the incompleteness problem for DDs becomes an instance of the more general phenomenon of quantifier domain restriction (henceforth, QDR). A variety of accounts of QDR are available in the literature, which offer the Russellian a way out of the incompleteness problem, showing how one could use an incomplete DD to make a true claim. It is not my aim here to review all of them.⁵ Nevertheless, it is relevant to distinguish the accounts of QDR depending on whether they treat it as a *semantic* phenomenon (in the sense of having an effect on the literal truth-conditions of the sentence), or a *pragmatic* phenomenon (in the sense of being irrelevant to the literal truth-conditions of the

³ Quine (1940, 146-147) notes: “Everyday use of descriptions is indeed often elliptical, essential parts of [the truth-conditions] being left understood”.

⁴ As Neale (2004, 109) and others have pointed out, the label ‘incomplete DDs’ is misleading. It is more accurate to talk about incomplete *utterances*, or *uses*, of descriptions, as the same DD in (1) might be complete if uttered in a world in which there is a unique table. For simplicity, however, I will continue using ‘complete’ and ‘incomplete DDs’.

⁵ For an overview of some of the proposals, see Stanley and Szabó (2000) and chapter 9 of Elbourne (2013).

utterance). Kent Bach (1987, 2000) is a proponent of a pragmatic Gricean account of QDR, drawing heavily on the distinction between semantic content and speaker meaning. He extends this account of QDR to solve the incompleteness problem for DDs (1987, 104-105; 2004, 220-223). I return to Bach's proposal later in the discussion.

The list of the proponents of *semantic* accounts is much larger. Concerning semantic accounts it is useful to mention Neale's (1990, 95; 2004) distinction between *explicit* and *implicit* approaches to QDR, a distinction that will be relevant in the forthcoming discussion. On an explicit approach the "descriptive content is 'completed' by the context", while on an implicit approach "the context of utterance delimits the domain of quantification and leaves the descriptive content untouched." (1990, 95) An implicit approach is developed in the framework of situation semantics in Barwise and Perry (1983, 161), and another version is proposed in Reimer (1998, 103-114). Quine (1940, 146-147), Grice (1969, 142), and others suggest the incompleteness problem for DDs should be treated along the lines of what Neale calls the explicit approach to QDR.

Explicit accounts fall into two categories: those on which the completion of the nominal is conventionally triggered by linguistic meaning (e.g., the saturation of an aphonic variable present in the logical form, or LF, of the sentence), and those on which the completion is the result of a process of free enrichment of some constituent of the literal content of the utterance. The former are sometimes called *syntactic accounts* (as they postulate specific elements in the LF of the sentence), and the latter *non-syntactic accounts*. Sperber and Wilson (1986, 189-193), Recanati (1993, 248; 2004a, 23f), Bezuidenhout (1997, 385f), and Neale (2000, 293; 2004, 122-123) are among those who favour a non-syntactic version of the explicit approach. According to Recanati (2004a, 27), for instance, QDR is the output of a process of "free enrichment" (i.e., not linguistically triggered) of the literal content of the quantifier, which contributes to the truth-conditions of the utterance. A similar explanation, Recanati (2010, 44-45) argues, is the enrichment of incomplete DDs into complete ones.

Other versions of the explicit approach do have syntactic implications, as they postulate aphonic elements in the LF of sentences containing quantifiers. According to one such view, the descriptive content of the quantifier is completed with a property that results from the saturation of a hidden variable. For instance, the DD 'the table' in (1), is completed to *the table in this room*, where the property of *being in this room* (i.e., the salient room) is the contribution of the

hidden variable, which receives a value determined by the context of utterance. There are different syntactic implementations of this idea in von Stechow (1994, 30), Stanley and Szabó (2000, 253), Stanley (2002, 368), Pelletier (2003, 150), and Stanley (2007, 248), depending on where the variable is located in LF. According to the situation variable approach, advocated in Recanati (2004b), Kratzer (2004), and Elbourne (2013) the hidden indexical takes a situation, and not a property, as a value. There are also proposals that do not postulate a variable, but an adjunctive clause recoverable from the context of utterance, as in Vendler (1967, 46) and Jacobson (2005).

The point of this brief overview is to introduce a number of distinctions between approaches to QDR that will be relevant later in the discussion. It is also to remind the reader that the defender of RTD has a wide variety of pragmatic and semantic approaches to QDR to choose from in order to solve the incompleteness problem. A concrete solution to the problem that Strawson's case pose to the Russellian also requires identifying the most plausible completion the DD in (1), among a variety of candidates. The question concerning how to pick out the best candidate is a different, orthogonal, question to the one concerning whether the incompleteness problem should be given a semantic or a pragmatic treatment. Here, again, the literature provides us with interesting options.⁶ Various mechanisms, psychological or otherwise, have been described, by which the context is said to fix the completion of the nominal or the restriction of the domain. One interesting suggestion is developed in Blackburn (1988, 271), Neale (1990, 25; 2004, 121), and Bach (2004, 221). As Neale puts it, this is an "explicitly *modal*" account of how the completion of the quantifier is fixed: "the nominal is often shorthand for, elliptical for, an abbreviation of at least one richer nominal the speaker *could have* used and *could* produce if asked to be more explicit" (2004, 121). Neale also makes a particular suggestion for the case of *referential* uses of descriptions (as opposed to attributive uses, following Donnellan's (1966) well-known distinction). For such uses, Neale (2004, 171-173) writes, the most plausible completion of an incomplete DD 'the F' is *the F that is identical to x*, where 'x' stands for the individual the speaker refers to (or has in mind). A completion along these lines is indeed the one the speaker could have used and could produce if asked to be more explicit, in the case of a

⁶ Schiffer (1995), Buchanan and Ostertag (2005), and others deny that context determines a unique completion or restriction and argue that there are many equally plausible candidates for the completion or restriction, each of them making a different contribution to truth-conditions. For present purposes, however, I make the simplifying assumption that the context does determine a unique completion or restriction.

referential use. Given that the use of the DD in (1) in the scenario Strawson describes is referential (i.e., the speaker has a particular table in mind and intends to convey something about that table), the Russellian might suggest that the truth-conditions of the utterance of (1) are: true iff *there is a unique table identical to this one and it is covered with books*. These are intuitively correct truth-conditions. As a consequence, Strawson's objection to RTD loses its force. It is not, as such, a problem that the Russellian cannot deal with. However, more sophisticated versions of Strawson's objection have been devised. This is the topic to which I turn in the next sections.

2. Ramachandran 1993

Ramachandran (1993) considers an utterance of (1) in a different scenario. This time the room in which the conversation takes place contains several tables, some of which are covered with books and some of which are not. No particular table is more salient than others. Ramachandran invites us to suppose that the speaker does not have the intention to refer with the DD to a particular table, or any other object, although she is aware that there are various tables in the room. If asked, the speaker would say that she wasn't talking about any particular table. Ramachandran comments that this is an "abnormal" (1993, 209) use of the DD and that, "we would find that utterance... *unintelligible*", in the sense that we "experience... much difficulty in simply interpreting the token of 1, i.e. in determining its truth-conditions" (1993, 211). According to RTD, the utterance of (1) in this scenario is false, due to a failure of uniqueness. But then, Ramachandran argues, this utterance of (1) "should be intelligible even though it is not 'contextually-complete'" (1993, 210). However, competent speakers judge (1) as *unintelligible* and *do not* judge it as false. This means that RTD makes incorrect predictions about this case.

Given the similarity with Strawson's classical objection (which also involves a failure of uniqueness), it is not surprising that defenders of RTD have appealed to various approaches to QDR in explaining the unintelligibility of the utterance of (1) in this scenario. For instance, Bach (1994) appeals to his favourite Gricean account of uses of incomplete DDs. On this account, the semantic content of an utterance of a sentence containing an incomplete DDs lacks "relevant specificity" (Bach 2004, 223), so a rational and cooperative interpreter will not take this to be the proposition the speaker intends to convey. This triggers the search for a relevant proposition that the speaker might plausibly be taken to convey. In the case of the utterance of (1) there is no such

proposition, as all the tables are equally salient: “none is so distinguished (e.g. by being demonstrated or by being isolated) that the speaker could be conveying a singular proposition about it. No wonder the utterance is unintelligible.” (1994, 185)

In his rejoinder, Ramachandran (1995, 286) points out that if Bach’s account were correct then the utterance of (1) should struck us as obviously *false*, and not as unintelligible. RTD predicts that the utterance of (1) is literally false, so how is it that we do not hear it as false, if RTD is correct? But Bach does have an answer this question. He writes that, “intuitively, one has no sense that there is any false proposition in the air. But there is an explanation for this: as soon as one hears (or reads) [‘the table’ in sentence (1)], because of its obvious incompleteness one... never actually computes the proposition expressed by the sentence in which it occurs.” (2004, 222-223)

Whatever the merits of Bach’s pragmatic proposal, it does manage to show that Ramachandran’s objection to RTD is not definitive, as there are explanations for the unintelligibility of (1) that the Russellian can offer. And not only are there pragmatic explanations, such as Bach’s. Others have appealed to semantic approaches to incompleteness in rebutting Ramachandran’s objection. Ganeri (1995, 289) and Buchanan and Ostertag (2005, 898) argue that an explicit approach to QDR on which incomplete DDs carry a hidden indexical, offers straightforward account of the unintelligibility of (1). On such an account the value of the hidden variable is given by the context of utterance, but in the case of (1) the context fails to assign any value to the variable. That is because there is no contextually salient completion of the DD, as Ramachandran’s scenario indicates. As a result, the hidden variable fails to receive a value, and so the utterance of (1) does not have determined truth-conditions. This explains why we experience difficulty in assigning truth-conditions to it.

In conclusion, not only defenders of a pragmatic account of QDR, such as Bach, but also those that prefer a semantic account of QDR, have an explanation of the data that Ramachandran presents, if they choose to be Russellians about DDs.

3. Szabó 2005

Another “Strawsonian” objection to RTD is introduced in Szabó (2005). Szabó’s aim in this paper is not to reject RTD, but to claim that DDs do not encode uniqueness at all, neither in

the way the Russellian claims they do, nor in any other way. However, I discuss here Szabó's argument only in relation to RTD, which is the focus of this paper. As with the other "Strawsonian" objections to RTD discussed above, I argue that Szabó's objection is unsuccessful.

Szabó imagines Watson present at the scene of a crime. Upon noticing pieces of broken wine glass on the floor, Watson utters (2):

2. A wine glass broke last night. The glass had been very expensive.

Watson does not realize that the pieces of glass he is looking at came from two different wine glasses. Szabó maintains that the intuition is that the utterance of (2) is *true*, although he concedes, "that the matter is not straightforward" (2005, 1197). This intuition does not square with RTD, so the Russellian might suggest deploying a mechanism of QDR. But, Szabó's argument goes, notice that in the given scenario there is no contextual domain restriction such that the DD picks out one, but not the other of the two glasses. They are, for all practical purposes, indistinguishable. As Szabó comments, Watson "may think he has a specific glass in mind or that he is referring to a specific glass—the one whose pieces he is looking at—but he is mistaken. He has no thoughts that are about one glass rather than the other." (2005, 1197) Therefore, the Russellian cannot avoid the prediction that the utterance of the second sentence in (2) is false, due to a failure of uniqueness. Szabó maintains that it is intuitively true, and so that the Russellian is wrong.

This objection to RTD is far from compelling. The Russellian might reply in two steps. She might first reject the intuition that (2) is true. Notice that (2) is made up of two sentences. While the first sentence of (2) is surely true as uttered in the given context, the latter is not so. If *both* glasses that broke are expensive, then the fact that, strictly speaking, the second sentence is not true might not matter much. The scenario, as Szabó presents it, makes it more difficult to appreciate this point. Considering each one of the glasses that broke, it is indeed true that *it* had been very expensive. But the intuition that it is not true becomes stronger if we consider a scenario in which it does make a difference whether one or two glasses broke. Or, alternatively, if we consider a scenario in which one of the glasses had been very expensive, but the other one not. Suppose that this issue is of great importance to the investigation. In both of these modified scenarios the second sentence would surely not be judged as true. Holmes, upon realizing the relevant details of the scenario (i.e., that two glasses broke, not just one), would surely not let Watson write down (2) in the final report of the investigation.

In fact, the Russellian might suggest (correctly in my view) that the utterance of the second sentence of (2) cannot be assigned a truth-value at all. Notice that the case that Szabó presents is similar to the one Ramachandran discusses. In both cases we might say that the utterance is unintelligible, that is, it cannot be judged as either true or false. In both cases the DD is incomplete and no contextual completion is available. But the similarities stop here, as the two cases are nevertheless different: in Ramachandran's case the speaker refrains from completing the DD in any way (either attributively or referentially, as in Strawson's original example); in Szabó's scenario the speaker intends to use the DD referentially and believes he succeeds in doing so to refer to what he takes to be the only broken glass on the floor. In fact, Watson's use of the DD is a *failed* referential use. As Szabó (2005, 1197) points out in the fragment quoted above, Watson "may think he has a specific glass in mind or that he is referring to a specific glass", but he is mistaken. The pieces of glass that he is looking at come from two different glasses. As a result,

Now, the Russellian has a good explanation for why a failed referential use of a DD is unintelligible, or cannot be judged as either true or false. This explanation is similar to the one given in the case Ramachandran discusses, despite the differences between the two cases. Consider again the hidden indexical approach to QDR. When the context fails to assign any value to the hidden variable the utterance fails to have determined truth-conditions. More precisely, Neale's (2004, 171-173) suggestion is that the most plausible completion of an incomplete DD 'the F' used referentially is *the F that is identical to x*, where 'x' stands for the individual the speaker has in mind. If the speaker does not have a particular object in mind, as is the case with Watson, then the variable 'x' receives no contextual value. This is why Watson's utterance of sentence (2), which involves a failed referential use of the DD, cannot be judged as either true or false, as it cannot be assigned truth-conditions.

Now, I am not suggesting that the above semantic account of QDR based on using hidden variables, or Neale's account of referential uses of DDs, are the best theoretical options when it comes to explaining these phenomena. Instead, the present discussion is only meant to show that the Russellian has simple and plausible ways to account for the cases that Strawson, Ramachandran and Szabó draw attention to. In fact, such cases manage to achieve quite the contrary of what they were meant to achieve: they offer indirect support to RTD, as they show that the theory has the capacity to account for these data. But not all of the cases of failure of

uniqueness are so easy to deal with for the Russellian. I turn now to uses of DDs that are more problematic.

4. An effective Strawsonian objection to RTD

Consider again an utterance of sentence (1), but this time in a slightly different scenario from those provided in Strawson (1950) and Ramachandran (1993):

1. The table is covered with books.

As before, there are several tables in the salient room, but this time the speaker who utters (1) and the addressee are in the hallway, outside the salient room. The door is closed and they cannot see into the room. The speaker who utters (1) has general reasons to believe that there is a unique table in that particular room and that it is covered with books (say, she has inductive reasons: all the rooms she checked out in the building are classrooms with only one table covered with books and the salient room looks like another classroom from the outside). Thus, the main difference with the previous cases discussed is that now the speaker uses the DD *attributively*, while the above uses discussed were either referential or in some way abnormal. This difference is essential in explaining why cases such as this are particularly problematic for the Russellian theory.

Given that the utterance of ‘the table’ is obviously incomplete, the mechanism of QDR predicts that the nominal is completed or, alternatively, the domain is restricted. Consider the former option first. One plausible completion of the DD is with the property of *being in this room*, given that the relevant room is both perceptually salient and the one the speaker has in mind when she utters (1). All explicit accounts introduced in the first section are compatible with this option. RTD combined with any of these explicit approaches to incompleteness predicts that the utterance is true iff *there is a unique table in this room and it is covered with books*. By hypothesis, there are many tables in that room and so the utterance is predicted to be *false*. Intuitively, however, it is *not* false, as we are not inclined to judge that the utterance of (1) as either true or false. Thus, RTD makes incorrect predictions.

What about implicit approaches to QDR? On such approaches the utterance is evaluated relative to a contextually restricted domain of quantification. But again, the most plausible restriction of the domain of quantification is to the set of objects present in the room. When

restricting the domain of the DD to that set, RTD predicts that the utterance is false. Again, this result does not square with intuitions.

Let me now discuss a possible reply that the defender of RTD might formulate. The Russellian might insist that the case is not so different from some of the previous ones discussed, and that a similar strategy to the one used with Ramachandran's example is applicable here too. First, notice that the DD is complete only if it actually picks out a unique object. Any candidate for a completion must render the DD complete, in this sense. Now, the property of *being in this room* is not a good candidate for a completion, as the description completed in this way still does not fulfill the uniqueness condition. The Russellian might go on to argue that the context of (1) does not provide *any* objective completion for the DD. All the candidates that come to mind for a completion of the DD in (1) are such that they correspond to the speaker's communicative intentions, and are in accordance to what the speaker takes to be a good completion of the DD. However, they all fail to complete the DD up to uniqueness, and so they are not good candidates for a completion. Thus, on an approach to QDR that postulates a hidden variable responsible for completing the DD, this variable does not receive a value at all, as there is no completion available. This means that the utterance does not have determined truth-conditions, as the variable receives no value. Such a prediction does coincide with the intuition that the utterance is neither true nor false.

I think that this account that the Russellian might propose for the case presented ultimately fails. A key premise on which it relies is that any good candidate for a completion of a DD is one that renders the description complete, thus denoting (at most) one individual. That is, a description cannot be completed with a property that leaves it still incomplete. But there is no reason to believe this must be so (except maybe for a bad reason due to an equivocation on 'complete'). A description might be implicitly *expanded* to a more complex one, even if the result is such that the uniqueness condition is still unfulfilled. Any plausible mechanism of QDR by which the completion or restriction is fixed can only be sensitive to what the speaker takes to be a good completion of the description, and not to actual objective completion (i.e., the completion that actually renders uniqueness). I mentioned some such mechanisms that have been discussed in the literature at the end of the first section. Most of these alternatives are speaker-oriented, in the sense that the relevant facts concern the speaker (what she intends to convey, what she would have said if asked for clarifications etc.). Other accounts are context-oriented, in the sense that

QDR is sensitive to other contextual facts (e.g., salience). However, the facts that are deemed as relevant on both kinds of accounts are normally accessible to the participants in the conversation. Therefore, these facts cannot determine an objective completion for those cases in which objective completion differs from “subjective completion”, as in the case of (1). The important point here is that, whatever mechanism of QDR the Russellian favours, it does predict that the DD in (1) is expanded with the property of *being in this room*, or in some other way. None of these mechanisms predicts that the DD is left unexpanded, as the Russellian suggests.

Furthermore, one might wonder what objective and non-subjective facts (i.e., facts inaccessible to the participants in the conversation) could *in principle* be relevant in restricting a quantifier domain? It is doubtful that we can find an utterance of a simple sentence containing descriptions or quantifiers for which the contextual factors that restrict the domain are not available to speaker and audience. And even if we could find such a case, the hypothesis that the completion of the DD is objective and not subjectively available would lead to the consequence that the propositional content of the utterance is not available to the speaker, which is a potentially undesirable consequence.

Moreover, if the Russellian requires that the hidden variable take either a value that yields uniqueness or no value at all, then a failure of uniqueness will always be due to the fact that the context fails to supply an objective contextual completion. That means that failures of uniqueness for utterances of the form ‘The F is G’ do not lead to falsity, but to the utterance having no truth-conditions (at least on accounts of QDR that postulate hidden variables). This is the result one expects from a Fregean or Strawsonian presuppositional theory of DDs, such as the ones proposed in Heim and Kratzer (1998, 80) or Elbourne (2013, 46-52), but not from a Russellian theory. On RTD one expects that failures of existence and failures of uniqueness for utterances of the form mentioned lead to falsity and not to lack of truth-value. In conclusion, the strategy suggested above in defence of the Russellian analysis of (1) (i.e. of looking for objective factors that determine the value of the variables and concluding that the context does not provide any plausible candidate) is not compelling.

I turn now to pragmatic defenses of RTD, which I have ignored so far. On Bach’s Gricean account of QDR, an utterance of a sentence of the form ‘The F is G’ is literally false when the uniqueness condition is not fulfilled. On this account, we are not supposed to hear it as false because, after noticing the obvious incompleteness of the DD, we never actually compute the

entire proposition expressed by the sentence. Instead, the obvious falsity of the utterance triggers the search for a relevant proposition that is what the speaker might plausibly be taken to convey. If there is no such proposition we hear the utterance as unintelligible or lacking truth-conditions, and, as a result, as neither true nor false. In the present case, however, *there is* such a proposition. The utterance and its interpretation by the audience take place before the door is open, and so *before* we learn that there are many tables in the room. At this point the speaker might plausibly be taken to mean the proposition that *there is a unique table in this room and it is covered with books*. Thus, Bach's proposal does not seem to have the resources to adequately account for this case and predict that the utterance is not judged as either true or false.

There may be other Gricean accounts of the case that the Russellian might appeal to. The defender of RTD might insist that the utterance is literally false, but it is also infelicitous, and its infelicity makes it difficult for us to form a truth-value judgment. As a result, the raw data from truth-value intuitions (or lack thereof, in this case) is not revealing of semantic content. As a general strategy to defend RTD, this might be promising, given that, in general, relying on truth-value intuitions to draw semantic conclusions is notoriously problematic. Data from such intuitions do not reliably track semantic content, a point repeatedly made in the literature. For instance, Bach (2002, 23) notes: "People's spontaneous judgments or 'intuitions' provide data for semantics, but it is an open question to what extent they reveal semantic facts", for "they are often responsive to non-semantic information." This is a general methodological problem for natural language semantics that the Russellian might exploit in her favour in refuting apparent counterexamples to RTD. I am not sure what the details of such an account could be, but similar pragmatic accounts have been offered to explain why utterances of the form 'It is not the case that F is G' do not sound false, although they are literally false, according to RTD, when the DD is non-denoting. Böer and Lycan (1976, 48-51), Grice (1981, 184-188), and Neale (1990, 162-164) propose such accounts (but see Elbourne (2013, 78-80) for a criticism of the Grice's proposal). If it is possible to extend a workable approach along these lines to cover declarative sentences of form 'The F is G', such as (1), then the Russellian might have an explanation of the troublesome data.

An anonymous reviewer has suggested a different pragmatic approach available to the Russellian. The idea is, again, to maintain that the utterance of (1) is literally false, although we (or many of us) are unable to hear it as such. The reason for this is that the utterance is also

infelicitous. The difference with the previous approach is that the source of infelicity is at the level of the speech act. An *assertion* of a sentence containing a singular DD as subject term is felicitous only if the use of the DD succeeds in denoting something. In our case the assertion is unsuccessful because the DD fails to denote. This is the source of infelicity that blocks our truth-value intuition.

I have no knockdown argument against a strategy of this nature. But before any discussion can start, the Russellian must provide the details of the account. RTD is a theory about the literal *content* of utterances of sentences containing DDs. It predicts that assertions of sentences of the form ‘The F is G’ are *false* when the DD is non-denoting. As such, RTD makes no claims about the appropriateness of speech acts of assertion. So, the Russellian must provide an account of how this theory about content has consequences concerning the appropriateness of speech acts. In general, the Russellian must tell a pragmatic story about what is the source of the infelicity of assertions containing DDs before the proposal could be evaluated.

5. Conclusion

Strawsonian arguments against RTD based on failures of uniqueness are a recurrent theme in the literature on DDs. In this paper I have discussed a number of such arguments, from Strawson (1950), Ramachandran (1993), and Szabó (2005). All these cases involve failures of uniqueness, yet they are different. Strawson’s original example is one in which the DD is used referentially. Ramachandran’s case involves an abnormal use: the speaker is in a position to use the DD attributively or referentially, but refuses to do either. Szabó’s case involves a failed referential use: Watson believes he has a particular object in mind to which he is referring, but in fact there is not such object. I have argued that the Russellian has resources to account for these data by deploying a variety of mechanisms of QDR available in the literature. The most effective objection against RTD based on a failure of uniqueness involves genuine *attributive* uses of the kind I discussed in the last section. The mechanisms of QDR cannot take care of these cases, as the completion of attributively used incomplete DDs is dependent on speaker intentions (it is subjective, to use the terminology introduced above). In the case considered the completion provided leaves the uniqueness condition unfulfilled. As a result, the proposition obtained after

the completion of the incomplete DD is predicted to be false on RTD, which does not coincide with the intuitions.

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