

# **Philosophy Paper 108: The Philosophy of Logic and Language**

## *1. Russell's Theory of Definite Descriptions*

What is Russell's Theory of Descriptions aiming to achieve? Does it succeed? Are definite descriptions best understood as genuine referring expressions, or as disguised quantifiers, or are they ambiguous?

### **READING**

Gary Ostertag (ed.), *Definite Descriptions: A Reader* (MIT Press, 1998).

*This is a useful collection, and most of the remaining recommendations are taken from it. Ostertag's introduction is well worth reading in its own right, and gives an overview of the debate – with significant contributions on the anti-Russellian side – as well as comments on the various papers.*

Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting", *Mind* 14 (1905), pp. 479-93 and reprinted in Ostertag.

Bertrand Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (Allen and Unwin, 1919), chapter 16 "Descriptions", reprinted in Ostertag.

*"On Denoting" is the classic first statement of Russell's theory, but the chapter from his book is an easier read and omits some seriously confusing material (notably the stuff on Gray's Elegy).*

P.F. Strawson, "On Referring", *Mind* 59 (1950), pp. 320-44 and reprinted in Ostertag.

*Another classic, though slightly oblique to the more recent debate. Importantly introduced the distinction between a sentence and a use of a sentence (the latter, roughly, being the act of expressing what Strawson in later work called a "statement" or a "proposition").*

Keith Donnellan, "Reference and Definite Descriptions", *Philosophical Review* 75 (1966), pp. 281-304 and reprinted in Ostertag.

Saul Kripke, "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference", in French, Uehling and Wettstein (eds), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 2 (1979), pp. 255-76 and reprinted in Ostertag.

*Yet more classic papers, with Donnellan introducing his famous distinction between "referential" and "attributive" uses of definite descriptions, and Kripke responding to him by suggesting that the distinction has no semantic significance. From this point on, it became standard for the defenders of Russell to appeal to "Gricean" pragmatic considerations, a trend enthusiastically and influentially followed by Stephen Neale (below). Paul Grice's seminal paper is "Logic and Conversation", originally published in 1975 but most available as reprinted with changes in H.P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Harvard University Press, 1989).*

Stephen Neale, *Descriptions* (MIT Press, 1990), chapter 3 "Context and Communication", reprinted in Ostertag

*Finally, two pieces that you might want to read to get contrasting overviews, and both available on the Web rather than in Ostertag. Unless you have plenty of time, leave my paper until after the tutorial!*

Peter Ludlow, "Descriptions" (2005), in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, on the Web at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descriptions/>

Peter Millican, Sections I-IV of "Content, Thoughts, and Definite Descriptions", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 64 (1990), pp. 167-203, but best read in the misprint-free version on the Web at <http://philosophy.hertford.ox.ac.uk/papers/1990Content.doc>.